

The Well Women of Scripture Revisited

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This paper will underscore the importance of careful interpretation of biblical narratives through a brief discussion of the narratives of biblical “well women.”

For over a century biblical narratives were pounded with a major frontal attack from the formidable arsenal of the historical critical method. In the last half of the 20th century, however, a new attitude regarding these narratives emerged as a result of more sophisticated attention paid to Hebrew narrative writing. Various voices urging this posture have included James Muhlenberg, Brevard Childs, Phylis Trible, J. P. Fokkelman, Meir Steinberg, and Robert Alter. Their accumulated contribution forced recognition of the distinctive literary features found consistently within biblical narratives.

They suggested that the oft-noted narrative characteristics, such as word and phrase repetition, conversation inclusion and length, among other details, are significant for correct interpretation rather than merely evidence of numerous redactors.¹ As a result, long-standing interpretations of biblical narratives may need to be adjusted. For example: the understanding of biblical patriarchy.

Many modern feminist writers exhibit a powerful revulsion against OT patriarchy. This patriarchal system, they argue extensively, is the

¹ As Robert Alter writes: “What role does literary art play in the shaping of biblical narrative? A crucial one, I shall argue, finely modulated from moment to moment, determining in most cases the minute choice of words, and reported details, the pace of narration, the small movements of dialogue, and a whole network of ramified interconnections in the text. . . . It is a little astonishing that at this late date literary analysis of the Bible of the sort I have tried to illustrate here in this preliminary fashion is only in its infancy.” Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 312.

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major influence behind all subsequent repression of women.² Rightly drawing attention to the pain and inequities women are still forced to bear, they are correct in noting that these grievous matters need to be addressed and resolved. However, in their view, nothing will change as long as patriarchal religions such as Judaism and Christianity exist, for it is just such systems that force women into subservience. The language in feminist literature against patriarchy is often bitter and uncompromising. To bolster their position, they regularly link their discussion with descriptions of their own personal experiences of inequity and indignity.³ Mary Kassian is blunt:

I am a woman. I have experienced the scorn and prideful superiority with which men have, at times, treated me. I have listened to insults against my capabilities, my intelligence, and my body. I have burned with anger as I have wiped the blood from a battered woman's face. I have wept with women who have been forcefully, brutally raped—violated to the very core of their being. I have been sickened at the perverted sexual abuse of little girls. I have boycotted stores which sell pornographic pictures of women. I have challenged men who sarcastically demean women with their "humor." And I have walked out of church services where pastors carelessly malign those whom God has called holy. I am often hurt and angered by sexist, yes, *sexist* demeaning attitudes and actions. And I grieve deeply at the distortion of the relationship that God created as harmonious and good. As a woman I feel the battle. I feel the sin. *Feminism identifies real problems which demand real answers.*⁴

Such offenses against women are horrifying. Feminist complaints are compelling. I am not seeking to make light of the abominable record of the mistreatment of women that continues to this day. However, in this

² Such as Naomi Goldenburg, Cynthia Eller, Mary Daly, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, to name a few.

³ For example, feminist Carol Christ: "During my years there, Yale's president was to make the infamous statement that Yale would never admit women as undergraduates because its mission was to educate 1000 male leaders each year. But I had not expected this experience. I had come to study truth, and truth was no respecter of gender, I thought." Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980), xi.

⁴ Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism With the Church* (Wheaton: Good News, 1992), 242, emphasis added. She forcefully argues this point though she is not a Feminist herself.

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paper I question feminist insistence that OT patriarchy is the prime cause of this.

In the following study, I wish to draw attention first to textual indicators within Genesis that seem to depict matriarchy far more positively than Feminism yet acknowledges. Following this, I submit a consideration of a NT “well woman.”

Hagar

Hagar is not a matriarch in the Covenant line. However, she is one of the “well women” of Genesis. Poignant details are recorded in Gen 21 when she and her son are excluded from Abraham’s family. After surveying the Genesis narratives, Trevor Dennis decides that this Egyptian slave woman is “more highly honored in some respects than almost any other figure in the Bible.”⁵ For example, the “Angel of the Lord” appears, for the first time in biblical history, to this rejected woman (Gen 21:17). Indeed, He even calls her by name! Sarah and Abraham have not granted her this dignity but typically call her “slave woman.”⁶

God does not abandon Hagar or her son Ishmael in their devastating situation. When they are on the point of death in the wilderness of Beersheba, God directs them to a “well of water” (Gen 21:19). He also promises to make Ishmael a great nation. Indeed, it is arresting how similar His promise to Hagar and her son is to the one they have been hearing in Abraham’s household regarding the son of promise: “Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, ‘I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude’” (Gen 16:10).⁷

This occasion is also the solitary time that a covenantal-type promise is announced to a woman. Dennis appraises this poignantly:

. . . how very surprising is the honor which is bestowed upon Hagar (and upon Ishmael too) in Genesis 16. For a start, annunciations are a rare commodity in the Bible . . . In only three cases, those of Hagar, Manoah’s wife, and Mary in Luke, is the promise of a son made to the one who will be the mother

⁵ Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 176.

⁶ Sarah speaking to Abraham, “Go, please, to my slave-girl” (Gen 16:2b). Sarah does not use Hagar’s name but refers only to her position. Up to this point only the narrator has given Hagar’s name.

⁷ God also reiterates this promise a second time to Abraham: “And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation” (Gen 17:20).

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of the child (although Sarah overhears in Genesis 18, the words are addressed to her husband). In only four cases does God make the announcement himself. . . . only two women in the entire Bible receive annunciations from God himself, Hagar and the unnamed wife of Manoah.⁸

It is also noteworthy that Hagar is the only woman in the OT, indeed the only person in all of Scripture, to give deity a name.⁹ The name El-Roi is found only here in the OT, and only Hagar expressed it. As Dennis insists:

Let no one underestimate how extraordinary this naming is. . . . After wrestling with God all night at the river Jabbok, Jacob names the spot, Peniel, or “The face of God” (Gen 32:30). After coming so close to sacrificing Isaac . . . Abraham names the place, “The Lord Sees” (22:14). Abraham’s name is very close to the one Hagar gives God. Yet, like Jacob, Abraham names the *place* of encounter. . . . Elsewhere Abraham calls *upon* the name of God (12:8; 13:4; 21:33), but that is a very different exercise. Moreover, Hagar does not name her God as an aside, or declare his identity to herself after he has left the stage. She names him to his face: “*You* are the God who Sees Me.”¹⁰

This occasion is also one of the three times in Genesis when a woman dialogues with God in Genesis.

Rebekah

Rebekah, a prominent matriarch¹¹ in Genesis, is notable. Jeansonne compels us to consider that

rather than minimizing Rebekah’s contribution to the Israelite people, the [Genesis] narratives that introduce and develop the portrait of the second of the matriarchs are striking in the way she is depicted. Although she is described as being a beautiful wife for Isaac, she is not appreciated solely for her appearance. Like Abraham, her independence and trust are demon-

⁸ Dennis, 68.

⁹ “So she named the Lord who spoke to her, You are El-Roi” (16:13a).

¹⁰ Dennis, 71.

¹¹ Keturah, Abraham’s wife after Sarah’s death, is mentioned only slightly, without any of the impressive detail that Sarah’s narratives exhibit.

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strated by her willingness to leave her family and travel to a strange land.¹²

Narrative details such as dialogue, narrative pace, genealogical notation, and other literary features suggest the prominence of Rebekah in Israel's history. She appears in the text as a young woman who takes great risk leaving her home and venturing into uncertainty. The Genesis narratives follow her journey as she then marries and becomes a mother. Both Rebekah's character and her journey are extensively recorded compared with her husband Isaac, the patriarch, of whom little is written. Rebekah's many positive qualities and strength of character are displayed in her life as a matriarch. Mishael Caspi and Rachel Havrelock suggest that "Rebekah's actions attest to a certain degree of female autonomy in the biblical world."¹³

Rebekah's genealogical designation alone is striking. In Gen 22:20–24, the genealogy lists the children born to Abraham's brother Nahor and his sister-in-law Milcah. Their eight sons are named, but the offspring of these eight sons (the next generation) are included in two cases. Only the children of Kemuel and Bethuel are given, and we are informed that "Bethuel begat Rebekah" (22:23). This is arresting, for she is the only named offspring of her father, yet later the narrative includes her brother Laban.¹⁴

If the narratives following the death and burial of Sarah are "patriarchal" in the feminist sense, they should deal with the life of the patriarch Isaac. Instead, the reader's attention is focused on Rebekah. Apart from the incident where Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son, we know nothing of the boyhood or youth of Isaac. By contrast, Rebekah is depicted more fully. Teubal's cogent analysis is correct: "The power of her personality is already evident when as a young girl she takes command of her destiny and leaves for Canaan."¹⁵

When Abraham directs his servant to find a wife for Isaac, one remark in his instructions is also indicative of a woman's status during the

¹² Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 53.

¹³ Mishael Maswari Caspi and Rachel S. Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road: Ruth, Naomi, and the Female Journey* (Lanham: UP of America, 1996), 38.

¹⁴ Jeansonne argues that even the placement of this genealogy after the account of the testing of Abraham with his son Isaac (22:1–19) emphasizes the importance of Rebekah (54–55).

¹⁵ Savina Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess* (Chicago: Swallow, 1984), xv.

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patriarchal era. Abraham declares that “if the woman is not willing to come with you, then you will be free from this oath of mine” (24:8). The patriarch is assuming that the woman will have the final say. And indeed, ultimately it is Rebekah herself who chooses to go. In fact, in the lengthy narrative of Genesis 24, her determination to travel with Abraham’s servant is spoken directly by her (24:58).¹⁶ In contrast to what might be “expected” in an oppressive patriarchy, her father determines nothing.

Upon the servant’s arrival at the local well, he meets Rebekah and asks for a place in her “father’s house” (v. 23). Rebekah arranges for his hospitality herself with her “mother’s house” (v. 28).¹⁷ Her father says hardly a word throughout this entire narrative.

Most impressive is the noticeable correspondence of key terms between Rebekah’s narratives and Abraham’s. Sternberg notes:

the references to haste that punctuate the narrative: “She made haste and lowered her pitcher . . . she made haste and lowered her pitcher into the trough . . . she ran again to the well” . . . bears more than the obvious complimentary implications for character and judgment. It echoes nothing less than Abraham’s model hospitality, “He ran to meet them . . . Abraham made haste into the tent . . . Abraham ran to the tent . . . he made haste to prepare it” (Gen 18:2–7) . . . the elevating analogy stamps her as worthy of the patriarch himself.¹⁸

According to the text, both Abraham and Rebekah leave behind “their country,” “their kindred,” and their “father’s house.” Both will be “blessed” and “become great.” James Williams highlights this verbal

¹⁶ “But her brother and her mother said, ‘Let the young woman stay with us a few days, at least ten, after that she may go.’ And he said to them, ‘Do not hinder me, since the LORD has prospered my way; send me away so that I may go to my master.’ So they said, ‘We will call the young woman and ask her personally.’ Then they called Rebekah and said to her, ‘Will you go with this man?’ And she said, ‘I will go’” (Gen 24:55–58). In narrative analysis, direct speech implies the prominence of the person.

¹⁷ [Eleazar speaking] “Whose daughter are you? Tell me, please, is there room in your *father’s house* for us to lodge?” . . . So the young woman ran and told those of her *mother’s house* these things” (Gen 24:23, 28, emphasis added). Her father Bethuel is still alive, for he speaks later (in v. 50).

¹⁸ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 138.

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correspondence by suggesting that “With this blessing the narrator quietly moves Rebecca into the cycle of God’s promises to the patriarchs.”¹⁹

After Rebecca marries Isaac and becomes pregnant, she apparently experiences great difficulty. In agony she inquires (*darash*) of the LORD. She does this herself (Gen 25:22). The phrase “to inquire” is significant in the OT. Prominent prophets like Moses and Elisha and leading kings of Israel inquire of the Lord. So does Rebekah, and she receives a personal oracle from Yahweh that her older son is destined to serve the younger.²⁰ Fokkelman finds a concentric “chiastic” structure in this scene which serves to underscore the importance of Rebekah’s divine oracle:

- A Isaac was forty years old when married Rebekah (20)
- B Rebekah was barren; prayer for children answered (20–21)
- C his wife Rebekah conceived (21)
the children struggled together within her (22)
- D Rebekah asks for—an ORACLE (22)
- D’ Yahweh grants her—an ORACLE (23)
- C’ her days to be delivered were fulfilled (24)
and behold, there were twins in her womb (24)
- B’ birth and appearance of Jacob and Esau (25, 26a)
- A’ Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them (26b)²¹

¹⁹ James G. Williams, *Women Recounted: Narrative Thinking and the God of Israel*, Bible and Literature Series, vol. 6 (Sheffield: Almond, 1982), 44. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn concur: “It is she [Rebecca], not Isaac, who follows in Abraham’s footsteps, leaving the familiar for the unknown. It is she, not Isaac, who receives the blessing given to Abraham (22:17). ‘May your offspring possess the gates of their enemies!’ (24:60).” *Gender, Power, & Promise: the Subject of the Bible’s First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 73.

Mary Donovan Turner also: “It is Rebekah who, like Abraham before and Jacob after, leaves her home. She travels to the foreign land guided by the blessing for descendants who will “possess the gate of those who hate them.” The reader of Genesis first encounters this promise for possession (*yah-rash*) in 15:3 where Yahweh seals a covenant with Abraham promising him descendants as numerous as the stars and possession of a land in which they would dwell. . . . It is important to note that although Abraham is guaranteed a son to carry God’s promise to his descendants, it is *not* Isaac who next receives the blessing for *possession* of the enemy. It is Rebekah who receives the blessing similar to Abraham as she leaves her family for the foreign land (24:60). The blessing for possession is given one other time, and that is to Jacob as he leaves for Paddan-aram (28:4). Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob are the ancestors of this promise.” “Rebekah: Ancestor of Faith,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 20/2 (April, 1985): 43–44.

²⁰ Noted by Turner, 44–45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 94. Fokkelman continues: “. . . the oracle is central. . . . ABC . . . C’B’A’, corroborate once more that we are at the beginning of a story about the new generation

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Highly significant also is the formula used to announce Rebekah's delivery: "And her days were fulfilled that she should give birth" (Gen 25:24). Mary Donovan Turner notes that this formula is used of only three biblical women: Elizabeth and Mary in the NT and Rebekah in the OT.²²

Later, when Esau her son marries two Hittite women, the text informs us that this is a "grief of mind to Isaac *and Rebekah*." (Gen. 26:35, emphasis added). This inclusion of Rebekah's distress regarding Esau's marriage to pagan women reveals that Rebekah is just as concerned about the covenant line as is Isaac.²³

It bears repeating that the Genesis narrator exhibits far more interest in Rebekah than in her husband Isaac, the patriarch. Jeansonne rightly argues:

and not of a Story of Isaac. They show that it is not Isaac's trial of waiting and the answering of his prayer which constitute the plot, but that the ins and outs of the children's birth are the main point. But the really explosive material, which can lend dramatic force to a story of approximately ten chapters, lies in the kernel which ABC and C'B'A' hold in their grip: God's word of v. 23. What food for conflicts is gathered there. . . . the oracle has the power to extend the conflict of the opening passage to the conflict of all of Gen 25–35. Need we wonder that this word of God is poetry?"

²² Ibid., 48. J. P. Fokkelman also observes additional implications of Rebekah's giving birth as he catches subtle nuances in the Hebrew: "even the constructive infinitive in 26b does not tell us that 'Isaac has begot', but only that Rebekah has given birth. this repetition of 24a (*laledet* . . . *beledet*) makes it clear to us eventually that this pair of children is not so much begot by Isaac as primarily an affair between Rebekah and Yahweh, an affair of the barren woman who receives children with God's help only. The father has been driven to the edge and, after having performed in 21a one action (which expresses his helplessness!), he does not appear again until v. 26b, again without action. The rounding-off of this story—truly a story of birth!" *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975), 92–93.

²³ Ibid., 47. John Murray comments similarly: "Although Rebekah had probably another motive which she had concealed from Isaac when she said to him, 'I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these, of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life do me?' (Genesis 26:35). There is scarcely room for question that, when Rebekah spoke so disparagingly to Isaac of the daughters of Heth, she had particularly in mind Esau's wives and, though the urgency of her protestation to Isaac was prompted by the need of having Jacob away from the rage of Esau, there was also the deepest concern that Jacob, as the one in whom the covenant promise was to be fulfilled, should not be drawn into the entanglements of Hittite marital alignment." *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 41.

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characterization of Rebekah yields a deeper understanding of her significance. . . . All of these actions are given without a polemical context, and the narrator does nothing to indicate that these were unusual activities for a woman to take. . . . The presentation of Rebekah shows that women in Israel were viewed as persons who could make crucial decisions about their futures, whose prayers were acknowledged . . .”²⁴

Rachel

During the next generation of patriarchy, Jacob tells his wives Leah and Rachel (whom he met at a well) of God’s command to “return to the land of your fathers” (Gen 31). In the process, he recounts the poor treatment he has received at the hands of their father to persuade them of the reasonableness of leaving.

Then Rachel and Leah answered him, saying, “Have we still a share in the inheritance of our father’s house? Surely, he regards us as outsiders, now that he has sold us and has used up our purchase price. Truly, all the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, do just as God has told you.” (31:3–6, 14–16)

They add to Jacob’s description the hurts they themselves suffered from their father and urge Jacob to hearken to the Lord’s word. They are not afraid to oppose their father. Nor is Jacob a male figure who issues commands to his wives, as might be expected from feminist depictions of patriarchy.

We again find a repeated Genesis “formula” regarding the Covenant: the sundering of human family ties for a divine purpose. Abraham is called to abandon his home for the place God will show him. Rebecca too abandons family and land, traveling from Haran to far-off Canaan. The same breaking of family ties is assented to by Rachel and Leah. Catherine Chaliel reminds us that

The capacity to leave is a measure of the clear awareness of the exigencies of their chosen status. . . . In the story of Genesis, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah know, with neither melancholy nor capriciousness, how to give up their moorings in order to enter further into the covenant, how to keep themselves available to the summonings of a God who chose them . . . This certainly argues for their extreme consciousness of the demands pertaining to the Promise, but also, and jointly,

²⁴ Jeansonne, 69.

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for the necessity of a common receptiveness on the part of man and woman to the urgent solicitations of the holy Word.²⁵

Old Testament Summary

The Genesis “well women” are not “wall flowers”! It would be unfair to the narrative portraits of these women to argue that women bow in submission to all men. Rather, though respectful of their husbands, these women are intelligent and willful. Nunnally-Cox rightly concludes: “Far from conforming to a traditional servitude, these women grace the pages of Genesis with their laughter, their sorrows, *their strength, and their power.*”²⁶

Feminists have been right to force attention on the abuse of women inside and outside the Church. But they have been wrong in their assumption that OT patriarchy is a prime cause of this long-standing oppression of women. The patriarchal system is a pivotal issue in their understanding of female repression. However, OT matriarchy exhibited in Genesis suggests a different perspective than that implied by feminist literature.

Feminists are right in demanding redress of the long-accumulating record of the subjugation of women. But they need to rethink the cause of this repression. The Genesis matriarchs are not suppressed or oppressed women. Biblical patriarchy must be defined by the biblical narratives.

Carol Meyers²⁷ proposes that many of the details recorded in the OT seem to indicate a rather equitable situation between male and female up to the time of the Israelite monarchy. The result of establishing the

²⁵ Catherine Chalié, *Les Matriarches* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 202–3.

²⁶ Janice Nunnally-Cox, *Fore-Mothers: Women of the Bible* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 20 (emphasis added).

²⁷ Carol Meyers argues further: “[T]he Hebrew Bible . . . contains some statements that appear to value men more highly than women or to give men certain legal privileges that are not extended to women. From our contemporary perspective, these texts give incomplete evidence of biblical patriarchy. They do not tell us how Israelite women felt about differential treatment. In the context of the specific social and economic structures that characterized ancient Israel, the existence of gender asymmetry, with men accorded a set of advantages apparently unavailable to most women, must not automatically be perceived as oppressive. . . . and the lack of evidence that the Eves of ancient Israel felt oppressed, degraded, or unfairly treated in the face of cultural asymmetry. Gender differences that appear hierarchical may not have functioned or been perceived as hierarchical within Israelite society.” *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 34.

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throne in Israel, she argues, brought great changes to the Israelite patriarchal society, with the former position of the female diminishing from that time on:

Feminists who condemn or bemoan the apparent patriarchy of ancient or other societies may be deflecting their energies from what should be the real focus of their concern: the transformation of functional gender balance to situations of real imbalance.²⁸

Meyer's suggestion that the suppression of women in Scripture begins with the emergence of the Israelite Monarchy is borne out textually in the narratives. God warns Samuel of the results to Israel should they insist on having a king (1 Sam 8). When the monarchy is instated, one notices a sudden shift in textual emphasis from women and men in basic

²⁸ Meyers, 45. Others argue similarly:

"The formation of the monarchy was perhaps the most significant change in the millennium-long history of ancient Israel's national existence. Even before socioeconomic analysis became a prominent concern of the study of ancient Israel, scholars recognized the dramatic changes brought about by state formation: 'The monarchy, owing to its nature and its effects, was the most radical revolution in ancient Israel. It aimed to give Israel an international status, . . . to industrialize the country, and to develop the city at the expense of the village.' [fn: E. Neufeld, "Emergence of a Royal-Urban Society in Ancient Israel." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 31 (1960): 37.] More recently the establishment of the monarchy as a powerful force effecting widespread changes and as being a watershed event in the creation of hierarchies in ancient Israel has been similarly evaluated: 'hierarchical structure, such as the monarchic states requires, means a complete break with the social, political, and economic principles on which tribal society is based.' [fn: A. D. H. Mayes, "Judges." Sheffield, England: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press* (1985), p. 90; cf. N. K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985, pp. 323–325.]"

"The rise of the state meant the gradual end of a society in which the household was the dominant social unit. The locus of power moved from the family household, with its gender parity, to a public world of male control. The establishment of a nation-state meant the growing prominence of the military and of state and religious bureaucracies controlling economic development. These institutions are typically public and male controlled; whenever they become an important part of a society's organization, female prestige and power recede.

"State formation meant a radical disruption of the social fabric of the clan and tribal levels of social organization. It is no accident that Solomon established a viable tax base and a public support for the imperial power of Jerusalem that involved a territorial redistricting of the kingdom. . . . The rise of male-controlled military, civil, and religious bureaucracies, and the concomitant breakup of kinship-based social organizations must have taken a toll on gender relations." *Ibid.*, 189–190.

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equivalence to kings, court intrigue, war, with women almost disappearing. This then becomes characteristic of the subsequent OT historical documents. The narrator thus subtly substantiates the fulfillment of God's prediction with this dramatic textual transition. The monarchy signals the end of vigorous matriarchy.

New Testament Well Woman, John 4

Though this particular narrative is found in the NT and was written in Greek, the writer was a Jew. Thus it would not seem unreasonable to suggest that the John 4 narrative might exhibit the same OT narrative properties.²⁹

On-going discussion of John 4 in the literature points to a need for re-evaluating the numerous narrative details of this passage as they cast light on the status of women.³⁰ All the verbal and literary subtleties that are part of this narrative need to be accorded their proper attention to accurately inform our interpretation.

As Alter suggests regarding the sequencing of Hebrew narratives, the theology of John's Gospel is expressed not only by choice of vocabulary, but also by the author's careful linking and balancing of one narrative scene with another. This becomes obvious with the conversation of Jesus and Nicodemus, a learned Israelite rabbi (John 3), immediately preceding Christ's conversation with a Samaritan divorcee (John 4). The differences between Nicodemus and the well woman in grasping the words of Christ are thus highlighted.

The number of verses in the well scene of John 4 alert the reader to its importance. Even more striking is the length of the first conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus. Dialogue is widely acknowledged as one of the notable features of the Fourth Gospel, as it is in all biblical narratives where it appears. The initial conversation in John 4 is one of the longest found in all four Gospels,³¹ taking up more than half of

²⁹ Indeed, this is what Joseph Cahill attests: ". . . the Samaritan interlude is not only a masterpiece of narrative design but likewise a story reflecting literary characteristics manifested in OT narratives of great antiquity. . . . literary analysis of NT narrative may enlarge the theological significance and secondly indicate dimensions of literary continuity between Old and New Testament narrative." P. Joseph Cahill, "Narrative Art in John IV," *Religious Studies Bulletin*, 2/2 (April 1982): 41.

³⁰ Though there is still discussion regarding the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, for the purposes of this paper, we will build on the received text. Our intention is not to explore text-critical issues.

³¹ The conversation with Nicodemus ends ambiguously in the narrator's comments.

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this particular narrative. On this basis alone John 4 is a very significant passage.³² Graf rightly concludes that in chapter four [of the Fourth Gospel] “we have . . . one of the most momentous utterances of our Lord.”³³

Within the first dialogue, the logic of Jesus’ seemingly abrupt turn from the subject of water to His request, “Go, call your husband, and come here” (v. 16), attracts much attention. Some commentators imply that this disrupts the flow of the conversation. However, a favorite Johannine literary transition device in a dialogue regularly alerts the reader of Jesus’ supernatural knowledge (1:42, 48; 2:4–3:2). Jesus’ request for her to bring her husband functions as preparation for His revealing to the woman that He knows all things. Her reaction in v. 19 shows that it has that effect: “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet.”

But in reality there is no real digression in the conversation. Jesus has heard the woman’s desire to thirst no more. Thus, He is gently leading her to recognize her need of a Savior.

The ensuing remarks of Christ (verses 21–24), His longest speech in the first dialogue, are widely recognized as foundational statements for mission theology, doctrine of the church, and the theology of worship. Cahill even suggests a chiasmic structure of this narrative with the apex highlighting true worship:

- A Meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the well: 5–9
- B Dialogue on living water: 10–15
- C Dialogue on true worship: 16–26
- B’ Dialogue on true food: 27–38
- A’ Meeting of Samaritans and Jesus: 39–42.³⁴

³² “From all I have said about the primacy of dialogue, several general rules suggest themselves for the alert reading of biblical narrative. In any given narrative event, and especially, at the beginning of any new story, the point at which dialogue first emerges will be worthy of special attention, and in most instances, the initial words spoken by a personage will be revelatory, perhaps more in manner than in matter, constituting an important moment in the exposition of character. . . . A quick review of the main functions served by narration in the bible will give us a better sense of the special rhythm with which the Hebrew writers tell their tales: beginning with narration, they move into dialogue, drawing back momentarily or at length to narrate again, but always centering on the sharply salient verbal intercourse of the characters, who act upon one another, discover themselves, affirm or expose their relation to God, through the force of language.” Robert Alter, 74–75.

³³ Dom Ernest Graf, O.S.B., “Theology at Jacob’s Well: Chapters from the Gospel of St. John,” in *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, 59 (Sept 1959), 1100.

³⁴ Cahill, 42.

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Christ's opening comment of this dialogue, "Woman, I assure you," further underscores this declaration of Jesus. Jesus has already shown that He is free from Jewish prejudice against the Samaritans. Now He seeks to instruct this Samaritan woman regarding the Jews. He declares that the great truths of redemption have been committed to them, and that from them the Messiah is to come. The historical problem of Jewish versus Samaritan worship is thus transformed into a declaration of the true encounter with God, ultimately climaxing in Christ's dramatic "I AM." (v. 26). The well woman is granted a direct, definitive revelation of the Messiah rarely given to anyone.

Another matter needs to be addressed: the characterization of the Samaritan woman. Because the first dialogue in John 4 contains a single reference to her unlawful marital status (vv. 16–18), most exegetes have restricted their understanding of this woman to this one single clue. As a result, she has been evaluated in a less than positive light. Some examples:

1. The time reference of the "sixth hour" when Jesus is said to have arrived at the well (John 4:6) is interpreted to mean that the woman comes to the well in the middle of the day to avoid meeting anyone in her great embarrassment. As William Barclay writes, "May it be that she was so much of a moral outcast that the women even drove her away from the village well and she had to come here to draw water?"³⁵

Also Kenneth Gangel: "About noon the woman came to the well, obviously a social outcast since that hot hour would have been an unlikely time to lug a heavy water jar back into the city."³⁶

However, well use was not restricted to the evening hours, except by shepherds. Other noontime encounters at local wells are not unheard of in Scripture. Jacob meets with Rachel at the well near Haran during midday (Gen 29:7). It is also important to remember that no one at that time had running water in the home! Furthermore, the comment of time in the narrative is grammatically connected with Christ's journey and His weariness.

2. Major commentators, including Brown, in the usual negative characterization of this woman, wonder, when she at first misinterprets Christ's reference to "living water," if "a Samaritan woman would have

³⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 148.

³⁶ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 74.

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been expected to understand even the most basic ideas of the discourse.”³⁷

Barclay exhibits the same attitude: “the woman chose to understand this with an almost crude literalism. She was blind because she would not see.”³⁸

Nicodemus, in just the previous chapter, also initially misinterprets Christ’s comments literally. However, this is characterized as merely a misunderstanding.

3. Other damaging indications regarding the well woman include her being referred to as a “five-time loser” and a “tramp.”³⁹ D. A. Carson describes her as “unschooled, without influence, despised, capable only of folk religion.”⁴⁰

Gangel is also disparaging:

Here was a woman who lived outside the boundaries of any religious or cultural standards of her day. A string of five husbands followed by a lover is certainly not unknown in the twentieth-first century, but it is hardly common even in our permissive society with its twisted tolerance for evil. In first-century Samaria, such a domestic arrangement was unthinkable.⁴¹

Similarly Bryant and Krause:

In order to receive Jesus’ living water she must deal with the flagrant misuse of her sexuality. Jesus asked her to fetch her husband.⁴²

Also G. H. C. MacGregor:

. . . Jesus finding her not only spiritually obtuse but even inclined to be flippant, tries to sober her by confronting her with the shady side of her own life and thereby to reach a part of her nature wherein he can awaken some response. He there-

³⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John i-xii: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁹ Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1985), 161.

⁴⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 216.

⁴¹ Gangel, 76.

⁴² Beauford H. Bryant and Mark S. Krause, *The College Press NIV Commentary: John*, ed. Jack Cottrell and Tony Ash (Joplin: College Press, 1998), 120.

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fore bids her “Go and call your husband, then come back here.”⁴³

Likewise Roger Fredrikson:

And then He opens up her whole confused situation. She has lived with a passing parade of men, five of them technically husbands, and the latest a live-in affair. None of them are lasting, meaningful relationships.⁴⁴

Whatever adjectives are attached to this woman regarding her reputation and her marriages, the consistent implication is that she is a low-class person, and any fault in the marriage failures are hers. Even the Samaritan woman’s witness concerning the Messiah to the “men” of Samaria is interpreted negatively. For example:

“Come here, look at a man who has told me everything I ever did,”—merely the exaggeration characteristic of a gossip, though some commentators have read into the words a hint that her many marriages were due not to the husbands’ deaths, but to her own contrivance.⁴⁵

In the literature this well woman is consistently portrayed as being a disreputable character incapable of grasping intelligent theological discourse. However, the details within the narrative do not yield that picture. Even her questions of Christ suggest differently. Her profound grasp of the theological thinking of her day is reflected in her intelligent questions about worship. Her comments, if truly listened to, suggest that she is *not* living “outside the boundaries of any religious or cultural standards of her day.”⁴⁶

The negative castigations of the Samaritan woman have also not been informed by this woman’s political savvy revealed in the narrative. She is not culturally naive. For example, the conversation between the woman and Christ opens with evidence that she is well aware of the political situation between the Samaritans and the Jews (v. 9) and seems to

⁴³ G. H. C. Macgregor, *The Moffatt New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of John* [based on the NT translation by James Moffatt] (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1953), 101.

⁴⁴ Roger L. Fredrikson, *The Communicator’s Commentary: John*, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie, (Waco: Word, 1985), 99.

⁴⁵ Macgregor, 108.

⁴⁶ As Gangel indicates; 76.

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teasingly wonder about the “ignorance” of these matters on the part of the Jewish gentleman at the well when she responds to Jesus’ request for a drink of water: “Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, ‘how is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans’” (v. 9).⁴⁷

Furthermore, as the conversation progresses, contrary to the evaluation of her in the commentaries, the Samaritan woman’s understanding of the Stranger deepens. She begins to call Him “sir” and then wonders if He might be a prophet. Her questions and comments consistently reveal her grasp of both Samaritan and Jewish theology. The conversation in the narrative clearly reveals that she is not “unschooled” in contemporary political or theological matters.

Contra Carson, as far as her having “no influence” after conviction of Christ as Messiah penetrates her heart, she overlooks the reason she came to the well, which strikingly fulfills Christ’s earlier promise regarding “thirst”! She leaves her waterpot and hurries to the town. She goes to where she knows the people, including men, are gathered, resting in the heat of noontide. And at her invitation they come to see for themselves the one of whom she testifies.⁴⁸

Textual evidence does not support the idea of her having “no influence.” Nor does it allow her to be the town harlot, for it is hardly possible that if she is truly a low-class prostitute, the men of Samaria would openly follow her to meet an individual described as being able to reveal everything a person has ever done, which is the well woman’s testimony to them about Christ. Janet Day is correct:

She has no trouble getting the people to hear her, to consider her question seriously, and to respond by accompanying her back to the well to investigate and assess Jesus for themselves (4:29–30, 39). Had she been a loose woman with a reputation of sinfulness, I question whether she would have gotten the same response. . . . The people respond readily and with no resistance.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ezra 4:3–6, 11f; Matt 10:5; John 8:48; Acts 10:28.

⁴⁸ “Physical water is secondary at this moment. All that matters is the possibility, the very real possibility, that God has performed one of his surprising and amazing acts in history. He has sent the long-awaited prophet like Moses who will revive and renew the people.” Janeth Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well: Interpretation of John 4:1–42 in Retrospect and Prospect* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 173.

⁴⁹ Day, 174.

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What the narrative details seem to portray is an intelligent city woman with a keen mind who has pondered the theological and political realities of her day and culture. The progression in the dialogue reveals Jesus' desire to bring this woman to faith, knowing that her mind and heart can grasp theological verities. With this one solitary divorcee, Jesus discusses the fundamental issues of Christian theology and worship, making His most profound theological statement on true worship to this supposedly "ignorant" woman, even though He Himself has warned about "casting pearls before swine" (Matt 7:6).

Like modern commentators, His own disciples seem not to see any potential in this well woman, for when they return, they wonder why Jesus is speaking to her (v. 27). Nor have they seen Samaria as a potential area for mission, but solely as a place to purchase food. The woman, however, is of a different mind and goes immediately to invite the people of her town to come meet Jesus. And Jesus waxes eloquent to the disciples about the "ready harvest" of Samaria: "Say not 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest.' Behold, I say to you, 'Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest'" (v. 35).

The woman's witness to the men of Samaria is an occasion for Jesus to become excited about the harvest of His ministry. And in a place as unlikely as Samaria, this harvest is ready. The well woman

proved herself a more effective missionary than Christ's own disciples. The disciples saw nothing in Samaria to indicate that it was an encouraging field. Their thoughts were focused upon a great work to be done for the Jewish people. They did not see that right around them was a harvest ready to be gathered. But through the Samaritan woman whom they despised, a whole city of men and women were brought to hear the Savior.⁵⁰

Some scholars suggest that the well woman is only half-hearted in her acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. The clues in the narrative suggest instead that she is rather immediate in accepting His divine claim when she grasps who He is. The learned Nicodemus, by contrast, has been unable to make such connections from similar concepts spoken by Jesus in the previous chapter. Unlike Nicodemus, who quietly disappears from the scene as Jesus' partner in conversation, the Samaritan woman invites

⁵⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 194–195.

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the men and women of Samaria to meet Jesus. In contrast to Christ's disciples, who go into the city only to buy bread, she hurries there to share the "Bread of Life."

The Pharisees of Israel have despised Jesus, demanding a sign that He is the Son of God. But the Samaritans demand nothing, and Jesus performs no miracles among them, except to reveal to the well woman that He knows her marital status. And many in Samaria receive Him. In their new joy they say to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of your saying; for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world," giving demonstrable confirmation of the influence of this woman's testimony.⁵¹

Conclusion

Feminists deserve to be chided for their castigation that biblical patriarchy subjugates women. OT narratives paint a different picture than they allow. The matriarchs are not suppressed women. Rather, they are seen as willful and directive within a basic position of gender equality with the patriarchs. The consistent picture in Genesis finds both men and women cooking and doing other household chores. Both genders also take care of sheep. It isn't until the later institution of the monarchy that this is drastically affected. Feminists are free to deplore patriarchy, but they cannot use the Genesis matriarchs as evidence to support that position.

In the NT, the gentle chiding is for the commentators on the Gospel of John who seem to miss numerous important narrative details in John 4 and as a result underestimate this well woman. Rather than a low-class prostitute, she is pictured as a well-informed city woman to whom people listen when she talks. A whole town full of people believe her testimony regarding the Jewish gentleman at the well and go with her to find Him.

Yes, she has been divorced five times, but the text never informs the reader who has been at fault in those divorces, or if, perhaps, some of the marriages might have ended with the death of a husband. Furthermore, it is generally acknowledged that divorce in that era seems to be the sole prerogative of the male.⁵² Within the John 4 narrative, it is important to

⁵¹ *Desire of Ages*, 192. Moreover, the Samaritan acknowledgment of the Messiah is proclaimed in the distinctive designation, "Savior of the world."

⁵² "In OT law, the initiative in instituting divorce proceedings lay entirely with the husband (Dt. 24:1-4). There is no hint of a divorce being initiated by a wife. This is in keeping with the double standard which characterized Israel as well as most of its contemporaries in the Mediterranean region." C. R. Taber, "Divorce," in *The Interpreter's*

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notice that Jesus is not criticizing the well woman's previous marriages, but rather noting her present situation of living with a man without being married. In fact, He twice commends her honesty in describing her present marital status.

It needs to be repeated that Christ unfolds to her the most profound and sublime theology. Christ, throughout all four Gospels, is portrayed as One who knows all things and all people. In the John 4 narrative, He surely knows not only that the well woman's mind is capable of understanding theological discourse, but even more importantly, that her heart is receptive. In fact, careful narrative work throughout the Fourth Gospel reveals that it is women who are the privileged recipients of Jesus' most important self-revelations (Mary, Martha, and the Samaritan woman).

The well woman of John 4 deserves our respect and a fresh evaluation of her character. Sensitive narrative analysis can help point us in the right direction. Interpretation of biblical narratives used to shape theology behooves careful attention to every detail.

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Dictionary of the Bible Supplementary Volume, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 244.