ZPTh

Zeitschrift
für Pastoraltheologie

Beton

ISSN: 0555-9308 45. Jahrgang, 2025-1

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The Samaritan Woman at the Well in the Scorching Heat! What Is at Stake? Revisiting John 4 from a Lens of Intersectionality

Abstract

The story of the Samaritan woman has served as a powerful text for the liberation of women and has yielded numerous layers of feminist interpretation. The scholars working with intersectionality as an analytical tool have recognized her multi-faceted oppression and addressed the issues of her identities of ethnicity, gender and other factors that function as the foundation in shame and honor cultures. Intersectional perspective is often misunderstood as mere intersections of various identities. On the contrary, intersectionality is that lens that offers perspectives on how multiple identities at the margins have a greater effect in pushing them to the deeper margins.

Die Geschichte der samaritanischen Frau hat als starker Text für die Befreiung von Frauen gedient und zu vielschichtigen feministischen Interpretationen geführt. Die Wissenschaftler*innen, die mit dem Analyseinstrument der Intersektionalität arbeiten, haben ihre vielgesichtige Unterdrückung erkannt und die Probleme ihrer Identitäten hinsichtlich Ethnie, Geschlecht und anderen Faktoren thematisiert, die als Grundlage in Scham- und Ehrenkulturen fungieren. Intersektionale Perspektiven werden oft missverstanden als reine Überschneidung von verschiedenen Identitäten. Ganz im Gegensatz dazu ist Intersektionalitität der Blickwinkel, der eine Perspektive bietet, wie mehrere Identitäten an den Rändern einen größeren Effekt haben, um sie an tiefere Ränder zu drängen.

The story of the Samaritan woman has served as a powerful text for the liberation of women and has yielded numerous layers of feminist interpretation (cf. Gench 2004; Fehribach 1998; Kitzberger 1999; Moore 1993; Okure 1988; O'Day 1992; Botha 1991; McKinnish Bridges 1994; Lienemann-Perrin 2004; Schneiders 1989; Hogan 1976).

Recent scholarship has brought renewed attention to the Samaritan woman through intersectional analysis, revealing how her narrative reflects overlapping systems of oppression and agency. Intersectionality – a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw – offers a valuable framework for understanding how the Samaritan woman experiences overlapping systems of oppression based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. Similarly, without direct reference to the terms „intersectionality" womanist scholars emphasize the necessity of attending to the lived realities of women of color in biblical interpretation calling for theological frameworks that honor women's survival, resistance, and agency. Their work opens a path to reclaiming the Samaritan woman's testimony as credible and significant, rather than morally suspect. (Williams 1993, 130–134; Weems 1988). Feminist, Womanist and postcolonial and postmodern scholars underscore how intersectionality – whether explicitly named or implicitly practiced – reveals the Samaritan woman not merely as a theological object but as a complex subject,

DOI: 10.17879/zpth-2025-8829 ZPTh, 45. Jahrgang, 2025-1, S. 197–207

whose voice and witness deserve recognition. Her marginalization, both in the text and in its interpretation history, exemplifies how intertwined systems of power silence those at the intersections of multiple identities. (see Parker 2020; Dube 2002; Kim 1997; Rodriguez 1991. 2006).

An intersectional interpretation considers how different aspects of identity (race, caste, gender, class, etc.) interact to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Intersectional perspective is often misunderstood as mere intersections of various identities. On the contrary intersectionality is that lens that offers a perspectives how multiple identities at the margins have a greater effect in pushing them to the deeper margins. Perspectives such as womanist studies recognized the deep effects of race and gender -multifaceted identities of margins, „intersectionality" has become a focused theory when Kimberle Crenshaw introduced it in 1989 in her paper, „Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti- discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." In this work Crenshaw was the first to employ the „intersection" analogy to describe how black women are uniquely oppressed because they can be victims of both racism and sexism (see Crenshaw 1989; Hil Collins & Bilge 2016). Moses Mike (2019) offers and locates historical introduction of intersectional theory.

Consequently, the story lends itself readily to different viewpoints that offer interpretations with rich nuances and liberative elements beyond the traditional and popular interpretations and understanding, namely that Jesus is the centre of the story – catering to Johannine Christology – that the Samaritan woman is of questionable moral character, and that Jesus offers her an opportunity for faith and conversion. In this regard, the standard relegates her role to that of a simple catalyst for bringing Samaritans to Jesus (see Bultmann 1957, 142). Though Okure's reading emphasizes the role of the Samaritan woman, and is thus read in favor of the woman, it does not apply necessarily a feminist lens, but offers a contextual lens as the title of her article suggests (see Okure 1988).

Feminist scholars, in contrast, emphasize several different aspects: her knowledge of the traditions, her logical and competent engagement with Jesus in his extensive theological dialogue, her role as both a spokesperson and missionary, and her mediation between Jesus and her community (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 327f.; Schneider 1991, 186–194). This is reflected in the way some church traditions give the woman in the story a name as *Photini*, as she is interpreted as the one who gave light to her village. She is remembered for her apostolic mission every year in Orthodox tradition on the fourth Sunday after Easter. Fehribach (1998, 78–80) says that the Samaritan woman's role in John is to contribute towards his Christological aspect, towards Jesus' self-revelation. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (1998) observes that in the end the Samaritan woman's missionary achievement is diminished when the townsfolk tell her that it is no longer on account of her words that they believe. However, it can be seen either as

„diminishing her achievement“ or as reaffirming what she said, implying that they see for truth what she represented.

At the same time, the feminist lens underscores her victimization and the denigration of her character in the narrative, particularly evident when considering the Samaritan woman in her socio-cultural context. Considering intersectional analysis, the Samaritan woman is a victim of systemic discrimination (cf. Parker 2021, 260f.) not only due to her ethnicity, religion and gender, but also her exposure to—and possible victim of— unwanted sexual attention throughout the popular interpretations. Similarly, her voice and agency receive mention but without acknowledging their importance or the credibility of her witness, which is a characteristic effect of intersectionality. The Samaritan woman has traditionally been portrayed as an immoral and inferior person in contrast to the divine, superior, pure, sinless, male character of Jesus. Similarly, in addition to her immorality, her incompetence in comprehending Jesus' metaphorical and spiritual language is emphasized, to highlight further his superior wisdom. The Samaritan woman is infamously known for her marital history, her presumed sinfulness, promiscuity and deviant behaviour, more than for the ironic force of her ignorance. The unusual setting of „being alone at the well … at noon", substantiated with the detail of „five husbands", further underscores the connection to her otherness as a „Samaritan". The brief clues serve as evidence that she was an immoral and sinful woman, to her utter disadvantage (cf. Bultmann 1971, 188; Schnackenburg 1968, 432). Interpreters use the details about the time of the day to support their view of the moral character of the woman, rather than to support the realism of Jesus' need to approach her when the day is at its hottest. The case to determine her moral character relies upon the details of a woman being seen alone in the public space at an inappropriate time of day: it is more likely for women to go to the well to fetch water in the mornings or in the evenings and usually in company with the other female friends and neighbours (cf. Neyrey 1994, 77–91).

This detail is the key that has allowed readers to conclude that the woman is a sinner and that she must have purposefully avoided the other women to pursue her immoral interests. Imposed definitions of character based on such trivial details is both systemic and normative for those experiencing intersectionality, which consequently strategically and systemically forces them farther into the edges of marginalization.

By deviating from this focus on details, liberationist hermeneutical readings offer a more refreshing perspective that Jesus was the woman's liberator because he reached out to her and recognised her needs, therefore authenticating Jesus as the emancipator and who brings liberation to women. Jean Kim says that the story of the Samaritan woman in John's Gospel has caught the attention of third world women because of Jesus' intentions to break ethnic, religious, gender and moral barriers (cf. Kim 1997, 109–120).

While it was most helpful to set the stage for the theological conversation for the liberation of women, viewing the Samaritan woman, who is presented as a receiver of the living water and an ignorant person and a person in need of a conversion, has maintained the status quo of the privileged giver. Consequently, the passive other remains on the receiving end thus consents to and upholds the norms of centre-margin dynamics. In the narrative, the Samaritan woman offers no challenge to Jesus to assert her rights and is humbly surprised instead. She accepts her impurity and untouchability through Jesus' request for water to quench his thirst in the scorching heat. The text provides essential details to support Jesus' need for physical water, but there seems to be a careful omission of the detail that the Samaritan Woman is a giver from the outset. Stephen Moore (1993, 207–227) points to the power disparity that is maintained even in feminist discussions. He says that the male as a missionary in the superior position and the female in the subservient position remains essentially undisturbed. Countering such a position, he questions whether Jesus' need is any less than that of the Samaritan woman, suggesting that Jesus' own need in approaching her is an important factor in an interpretation of the text.[1] In his article, Moore discusses and counters several feminist readings that affirm a similar view. Although readings of feminist interpreters and other contemporary scholars of the marginalized are uplifting and somewhat liberating, I depart from this interpretation through a stance of my own intersectionality, and challenge the status quo of the giver and receiver model; in other words, I move away from the advocate and subaltern model where the privileged advocate for the rights of the subaltern, namely those who cannot speak for themselves.

However, my goal is not to deny the importance of the role of Jesus towards liberation, but to challenge and propose that the true liberation takes place through mutual reconciliation and transformation. Therefore, I advocate a paradigm shift to interpret Jesus' act as primarily a self-liberating act that comes from self-transformation and reconciliation which is crucial for Jesus, himself, first to meet his physical needs and second, to fulfil his own mission and thereby enter the space of mutual reconciliation. In doing so, Jesus invites the woman to be a partner in his mission, while acknowledging that in this partnership and extension of the mission of Jesus, he liberates the woman from her externally imposed marginality.

There are three aspects of Jesus' act in the text, which I emphasize are key elements for articulating such a transformative view. Firstly, Jesus initiates the encounter by asking the Samaritan woman for a drink from her vessel, despite the fact that it is strictly prohibited for a Jew to share common vessels with Samaritans.[2] Second, the story emphasizes Jesus' own need to drink water from the Samaritan woman and herein lies the

1 Musa Dube also expresses uneasiness with the kind of interpretation that reads Jesus as a giver and the woman, as receiver (see Dube 2002, 66).

2 John 4:9b affirms that the astonishment of the Samaritan woman comes from the prevalent tradition that „Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans."

significant potential for transformative liberation; and third, the importance of Jesus' self-transformative act for the fulfilment of his own mission.[3] John's description of Jesus insists that Jesus' mission is for the world (3:16), a world that includes the Samaritans. I argue that what is crucial for an intersectional reading through a Dalit feminist standpoint of the text is to dwell on Jesus' original motive: to have a drink from the Samaritan woman to quench his thirst, a motive which transforms him, and eventually transforms the tradition. Asking for a drink and drinking the water from the Samaritan woman on the material level is what transpires in this context. The projection of Jesus' having the living water to offer to the Samaritan woman distracts from the original motive and diverts attention from his need for transformation that enables him to first drink the water proffered by the Samaritan woman.

What else can better contribute to the trust of the Samaritan woman, if not her to witness Jesus' act of reconciliation and acceptance of her by simply inviting her on a par with him? What else could affirm Jesus' reconciliatory attitude, if not his drinking water from the Samaritan woman?

According to the text, Jesus asks for water from the woman, but shifts to offering „living water" to her, which is better than what she has. Even though it is not written in the text that Jesus drinks water that is drawn from the Samaritan woman's vessel, it seems important for a Dalit feminist reading to ask whether Jesus actually did so, and if the answer according to the text is „no" since it is not mentioned, then it is compelling to ask, why not?

It is the Samaritan woman's experience of being accepted as an equal by Jesus; she witnessed his eradication of those borders that she thought existed between Jews and Samaritans, and she subsequently shares her liberative experience with others in the community. Thus, it is not just her belief in Jesus as the Messiah that made her bear witness before the entire village, but the liberating experience that she had in her encounter with him. The Samaritan woman extends her liberation to her whole community, becoming a voice and an agent in sharing her transformation. While it is liberating to consider her voice and agency in the text, it is important also to recognize her victimized status of intersectionality and to recognize interlocking systemic oppression that has relegated her to the far margins of society at the time.

Feminist scholarship dismisses judgmental and misogynist interpretations of the Samaritan woman on the one hand, while recognizing her voice and agency, on the other. This interpretive stance offers a lens that does not undermine the marginalization and exploitation of multiple forms of oppression through the narrow definitions of „a woman", „a Samaritan", „a religious inferior", and „ethically charged". Jean K. Kim (1997, 109–120) notes that the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in

3 See other references in John, 3:16; 4:35–38, 42; 8:12, 23; 9:39; 12:31 and 13:1.

John's Gospel has caught the attention of third world scholars because of their experience of multiple-layer victimization like that of the Samaritan woman in the story.

Adding an additional perspective to the scholarship, Musa Dube (2002, 37–57) points out that the woman, who first thought that Jesus was just a simple Jewish man, discovers that he can give her „living water" that will lead her to eternal life (v.10); that he is greater than Jacob; that he is not only a prophet, but the „Saviour of the World" (v.42). For Dube (2002, 37–57), this gradual unveiling of Jesus' identity characterizes him as an extremely superior traveller, who thus surpasses all other local figures. The superior-inferior paradigm is strongly evoked in the ironic conversation between Jesus and the woman. The text on the one hand reveals her knowledge, because she counters almost every statement that Jesus makes with sense and logic as well as with a knowledge of history and tradition. But on the other hand, her knowledge, logic and sense are vanquished by the power of Jesus' knowledge.

Jean K. Kim (1997, 109–120) argues that the author used the ignorance of the Samaritan woman as the means through which Jesus' identity is revealed progressively. Using a metaphor of colonial experience, Musa Dube (2002, 37–57) reacts to the sharp division maintained throughout the story between those who know, i.e. the colonizer, and those who know nothing, i.e. the colonized. The Samaritan woman is characterized on the one hand as an ignorant native, morally/religiously lacking, and on the other hand, Jesus is characterized as knowledgeable and omniscient. Moreover, she is portrayed and interpreted not only as an ignorant native[4] but also as an ignorant woman who is confined to the private sphere and has limited intellectuality, in contrast to a man who, as patriarchal culture supposes, knows better. Both the author himself, and traditional interpreters develop the themes of her intellectual inferiority and general ignorance to elevate the superiority of Jesus as knowledgeable.[5] On the other hand, scholars have regarded John's gospel as more generous towards women portraying them as disciples, apostles, and even missionaries, and it has been a relatively comfortable dwelling place for feminist scholars. (cf. e.g. Brown 1975, 688–699; Schneiders 1991, 35–45; Seim 1987, 56–73) Ingrid R. Kitzberger (1995, 564–586) while confirming the allegations of male bias, states, „The Gospel of John shows an outstanding interest in female characters and remarkable sensitiveness concerning their characterization." She also comments that it is important to be aware of the text's rhetorical ambivalence in moving towards liberating truth (cf. Kitzberger 1998, 34).

4 Ibid.

5 See for example Raymond Brown's influential article on the importance of women in John's gospel, which provided a good lead to pursue feminist explorations in: John's Gospel R. Brown, Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel, Theological Studies 36 (1975), 688–99; Sandra M. Schneiders, Women in the Fourth Gospel, 35–45; T. Karlsen Seim, Roles of Women in the Gospel of John, in: Aspects of the Johannine Literature (ed. Lars Hartman and Birger Olsson; Uppsala: University Press, 1987), 56–73.

The Samaritan woman is further victimized in the interpretive tradition as „a character" and as „a sexual object". The combination of text and tradition jointly marginalize, discriminate against, and re-victimized her. For example, Linda McKinnish Bridges (1994, 173–176) points out that even though the Samaritan woman is the central character in the story, she remains nameless, without any identity in the text. Similarly, traditional interpreters have refused to give her an important role in the story. Luise Schottroff (1998, 157–181.174) explains her victimization as sexual exploitation. She argues, „The Samaritan woman is described as a woman in an extreme situation of sexual exploitation. The man with whom she now lives did not even offer her the security of a marriage contract."

The question of the Samaritan woman and her five husbands has been a pressing, conflicting, and perplexing issue for biblical scholars who attempt to interpret the text through its socio-cultural context. What was marriage for a woman in late ancient society? A social norm? An economic necessity? Security? Or is it sexual pleasure? Feminist biblical scholars have struggled to understand the complexity of the issue of five husbands and have interpreted her marital status in several ways to question those uncritical examinations and quick conclusions. They have tried to unpack the mystery with various explanations, such as forced levirate marriage, divorce or widowhood in this socio-historical context.[6]

Whether or not modern-day readers comprehend her status as a woman through the extensive details about her personal life, her being spotted at the well in the scorching heat, forces to raise the question from this socio-cultural realistic context: why did the Samaritan Woman go to the well in the scorching heat? Why does it matter?

Let me offer a perspective shaped by a lived experience, that is also a shared experience within the community – an experience that brings relevance and depth to the discourse on intersectionality. The emphasized identities – particularly those shaped by caste, colonialism, and gender – are not marginal nuances but defining realities that affect day-to-day existence in profound ways, which may be invisible to others that are distanced by culture and privilege by class, colonialism, caste and gender. In many Western contexts, intersectionality tends to emphasize the complex interplay between race, class, and gender. While this is important, such frameworks often unintentionally neglect the enduring impact of caste and coloniality – systems that still operate powerfully, both within India and across global diasporic communities.

This is why Dalit feminist lens becomes crucial. It challenges and decolonizes intersectionality by refusing to sideline caste as a secondary or regional concern. Instead, it asserts caste as a central axis of oppression and resistance that must be engaged on its own term and thus offers not only a corrective lens but also a radical expansion of what

6 Note the sevenfold Levirate Marriage of a woman in Mark 12:23. Consecutive marriages among men and women were rare in antiquity. See Schottroff, The Samaritan Woman, 162.

intersectionality can and must account for. The sharing of Dalit experiences is not a mere appeal to sympathy or a catalog of victimhood. These stories – rooted in structural violence, daily humiliation, yet also resilience – are themselves sources of knowledge. They speak theologically, ethically, and politically. Therefore, dalit feminist intersectionality offers both lens and agency for deeper solidarity and collective transformation.

It is my strong recollection that it is strange to go to the public well in the heat of the day to draw water except under dire circumstances. Royce Victor's (cf. 2016, 160–176) in her article gives additional nuances of women going to the well to fetch water, especially Dalit women who have scarcity of resources. I know this by firsthand growing up in India. Even when we had a well in our back yard, drawing water from the well is a job for the morning, almost the very first thing to do as an integral part of morning routines. It is also customary that water is stored in large containers, so it lasts for the rest of the day. If the need for more water presents itself in a household, sometimes people draw water in the evening after the sun goes down. A large part of the community, however, depends on the public wells for their water needs.

As a child and a teenager, I lived a few yards from a community well. This huge well was resourceful and life-giving for the residents of my town, but it has also played a darker role. Among the others, let me share a heartbreaking story of Prema a middle class dalit/untouchable woman and somewhat wealthy high caste man, Raj, who fell in love with each other. As expected, the families, most typically, the high caste/richer/male family would outrightly reject such an arrangement for marriage. Love marriages, inter-caste & cross-subcaste marriages were strictly prohibited. While there may be some leniency in the past two decades, the norms largely stay the same. Young men and women are watched and guarded so they do not mingle and end up in unwanted circumstances like as Prema and Raj in order to keep the and protect the intrinsically divisive and oppressive caste system. In a culture where love marriages are strictly prohibited, dating is non-existent. If young men and women connect in love, it must lead to marriage according to the norms of the society because as they have been seen as a couple, even though paradoxically it is met with opposition from the very beginning.

No matter how discreetly a young couple hides from the elders and community, somehow the word gets out because of its community-centered society where people talk to people and are always monitoring each other's behavior. Such a day occurred in Prema and Raj's lives. Someone shared with the young man's parents that the couple had been seen together, perhaps laughing together or holding hands or sharing a table in an ice cream parlor. The family of the young boy's parents mobbed Prema's house, questioning them and shaming them, and disparaging them as socially inferior—just like caste they belong to. How dare they catch their son through the tricks of their daughter?

Everyone came out in the street to watch the drama. Prema's parents had no clue about the situation and were in shock. Instead of comforting Prema, Prema's father was furious as receiving blame from the other family, and he abused her physically and emotionally and restrained her from going out the house. She tried through the means of friends to reach out to the young man who promised her many things, to stand by her no matter their differences, but in vain. He refused to take a stand. Prema felt ashamed and shattered. Prema's family quickly tried fix the problem by finding just any man, so they could rectify her shame. Prema was still in love with the man, unable to meet him, and left vulnerable. She felt immoral and shamed, all because she has allowed another a man get close to her prior to her wedding, It was her duty and expectation that she stays a virgin. Prema is now blacklisted in the community, though same is not true regarding a man, and he enjoyed his normal life. After all, it is not his duty to safeguard his virginity, and it is not a masculine concept to be considered but purely a feminine one that needs to be guarded. Her chances of finding a decent match is a long shot, so now the widowers, or the elderly, are sought after to come to her rescue and take her to be their wife to fix her shame, as well as that of her household. So, she decided to end her life. When everyone was taking an afternoon nap, she broke out of the house, went to the nearby well, jumped in and took her life.

Bearing the weight of shame and honor culture, the Samaritan woman embodies the burden of multiple silences, where her voice was either dismissed or denigrated. On the contrary Jesus engages in one of the longest discourses with the Samaritan woman. Her midday visits to the well, traditionally interpreted as a sign of marginalization or moral avoidance, may signal something deeper: a woman navigating public scrutiny, gendered suspicion, and relational trauma just like the dalit woman in the autobiographical story, choosing isolation over humiliation. Perhaps her excitement is not merely that he „told me everything I've ever done," but that he did so without reducing her to any of it. In that moment, her story becomes testimony – not despite her past, but through it. Her voice, once silenced, now echoes across Samaria. Hers is not the excitement of validation through moral rescue, but the joy of being *fully seen* and *fully restored* – an encounter of liberating recognition.

What if the Samaritan Woman's excitement is that Jesus simply saved her life from unimaginable circumstances? What if she came there for some time of solitude away from those who actively victimize her? What if Jesus's offer of living water promised her life back? What if she has never experienced such respect except from Jesus? Jesus meets people where they are, and he takes it upon himself to erase borders and barriers and religious misconceptions as a sign of reconciliation. Jesus in his missional journey crosses border to eliminate the. Suppose for a moment that it was the Samaritan woman who went into a Judean town and wanted to meet with Jesus. This story would not be the same, because then she would have crossed the boundary and become a woman who would have trespassed and therefore deserved retribution. Therefore,

Jesus presents an example of call and duty for those that are privileged to take initiative for reconciliation.

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