ARE THERE IMPURITIES IN THE LIVING WATER THAT THE JOHANNINE JESUS DISPENSES? DECONSTRUCTION, FEMINISM, AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

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Jesus, weary from his journey, is sitting on the lip of the well. The Samaritan woman arrives to draw water. The crowd parts to let her through. Some have brought binoculars, other are already taking notes.

Jesus' Desire

For many who have written on the scene at the Samaritan well, the woman's oblivion to her own need, so much greater than that of Jesus, is the pivot on which the irony turns. Paul D. Duke, for example, remarks, "Jesus greets the woman with a request for water (cf. Gen. 24:17), an irony in itself in view of who will eventually give water to whom". 2 Gail R. O'Day elaborates: "She assumes that she is in conversation with a thirsty Jew; this Jew informs her that if she knew both the gift of God and the identity of the person with whom she was speaking, she would recognize that she herself was the thirsty one". 3 Teresa Okure concurs:

In Jesus' case, his exercise of humility is outstanding by the fact that though he is the one with "the gift of God" to offer (v 10), he nonetheless approaches the woman as a beggar [...] Ironically [...] the woman is the one who needs to drink. Jesus' thirst and her as yet unrecognized thirst are thus inseparably linked [...] The whole point of v 10, therefore, is that if only the woman knew

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1 An earlier version of this study was presented at the joint annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature (Johannine Literature Section) in New Orleans, November 1990. That paper, in turn, was a revision and expansion of pp. 160–63 of my book, Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).


it, she, not Jesus, is the beggar who needs to ask and receive from him the gift of eternal life, given freely for the asking.\(^4\)

Raymond E. Brown distills the dialogue thus: "Jesus asks the Samaritan for water, violating the social customs of the time . . . . Woman mocks Jesus for being so in need that he does not observe the proprieties . . . . Jesus shows that the real reason for his action is not his inferiority or need, but his superior status".\(^5\) Rudolf Schnackenburg is yet more blunt: "It is not Jesus who is in need of anything, but the woman; and she is confronted with the one person who can satisfy the deepest needs of man".\(^6\) But are Jesus' own needs in this scene really any less than those of the woman?

"Give me a drink", asks Jesus. The demand would appear to be double. Seated wearily at a well whose water is beyond his reach, Jesus desires a drink. But he has another desire that well water cannot satisfy, as 4:10 suggests: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water".\(^7\) What Jesus longs for from this woman, even more than delicious spring water, is that she long for the living water that he longs to give her.\(^8\) Jesus thirsts to arouse her thirst. His desire is to arouse her desire, to be himself desired. His desire is to be the desire of this woman, to have her recognize in him that which she herself lacks. His desire is to fill up her lack. Only thus can his own deeper thirst be assuaged, his own lack be filled. To this lack, one of several holes around which my reading is organized, I shall later return.\(^9\)

\(^7\) Except for an occasional attempt to render the Greek more literally, English translations in this article will follow the New Revised Standard Version.
\(^8\) Cf. Okure, p. 95.