

Gerardo Daniel RAMOS, SCJ

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (Jn 4:1-42)

(February 2010)

A proper exegesis of the story of the Samaritan Woman, in consideration of the First Testament and the Rabbinical symbolism, allows us to perceive the evocative and provocative wealth in the narrative built around the themes of woman, water, wisdom and worship. The author of this exegetical meditation can be contacted at gerardoramos@ciudad.com.ar. He is a religious priest of the congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Betharram who lectures on pastoral theology in the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina (Buenos Aires) and elsewhere.

In our age, when many religious institutions and traditional churches in western culture are sinking, the passage of Jesus and the Samaritan woman appears as a privileged paradigm not only for mystics of the incarnation, but also for the New Evangelization. The dialogue happens around a well, below the bright midday sun, in a lonely place. The conversation starts because of an elementary need: water. The developing dialogue will take account of other needs and lead not only the woman, but also to the people of her village, to faith. The woman is the image of the passionate human will, and Jesus is discovered as the only one able to answer to the thirst of the Absolute found in all persons coming into this world.

The way along Samaria

*When the Lord knew that Pharisees heard that Jesus made more disciples and baptized more than John - though it was not Jesus indeed who baptized, but his disciples-, he left Judea and went at once towards Galilee. He must cross along Samaria. He arrives at a city of Samaria called Sicar, near the hereditary Jacob gave to his son Joseph. There was the well of Jacob. Jesus, as he was tired because of the road, sat down on the well. It was **about the sixth hour (vv.1-6)**.*

vv.1-3. Jesus popularity is measured by the number of baptisms, and put in comparison with those of the Baptist. But his hour has not yet arrived. To avoid concentration of attention on him, Jesus decides to leave Judea and goes towards Galilee. A wise decision when the reason and the consequences of the success are ambiguous, for it is better to watch the situation from a distance rather than be over involved with problems. Moreover, one must avoid jealousies. For these reasons, Jesus goes away from the Pharisees, but carries with him and will enlarge the *water* symbol of the Baptist.

vv. 4-6. *He had* to walk along Samaria. We might object that it was not the only possible road: it was, of course, the shortest, but also the most dangerous. The western road, under Roman control, could be preferable. But perhaps we may discover a theological meaning in *edei* (= 'he must'), in a symbolic expression that goes further the literal interpretation of words. It is a question of a pastoral need, as the text will show it.

In Sicar Jesus sits down to rest, thirsty, around a well. The text says literally "on the well," showing the close relation between Jesus and the well of Jacob (not any well!, as we shall see). It is in the first place a physical place to rest, to drink and to recover strength. But we shall see that it is not only that. Around that well there were ancient biblical stories: the meeting between Isaac and Rebecca (Gen 24), Isaac's servant and Jacob's future wife, the beautiful Rachel (Gen 29), Moses and Jethro's daughters - with one of whom he will be married (Ex 2:15ff). As we see, all these scenes have spousal implications. And each well is related to a woman. In the rabbinic tradition, the well is a place of God's revelation. It reminds us of Yahweh's presence in the middle of the pilgrim people along the desert: an enlightening and strengthening spousal presence. According to rabbinic tradition, the well walked together with Israel: "Where the fathers went, the well went before" (Rabbi Aqiba). The well is a symbol of the Law, and also of the Word (I Cor 10:4). Life sprang from it, as of the Torah, which is the intimate expression of the Covenant: to it was necessary to go every day, in the same way as women had to go every day to draw out water from the well. The study of the Torah itself is a well-digging. In consequence, the water is also a symbol of Wisdom, identified with it (cf Bar 3:12; Sir 24:30ff; Wis 7:25): the Wisdom that offers "water of wisdom" (Sir 15:3) and also the pleasure, for Wisdom gives rest and brings joy.

The Woman and the Well

A woman of Samaria arrives to pull water (v.7a).

"A woman (...) arrives" (2:4; 4:21; 19:26; 20:13.15) at midday, at a difficult hour, not as other women or with them. Perhaps she did not want to be seen. It may be she felt herself discriminated by the other women, for the reason that the text will tell us, about her five men. But in the Gospel there is a reference to another woman at the same

hour (Jn 19:26), and the words that we will then hear from Jesus will be related with the desire to drink (19:28). And so there and then it will be Jesus who offers the true drink, like Yahweh in the desert (19:34; cf. Ex 15:22-27; 17:1-7). Moreover, in the Sacred Scripture woman personalizes wisdom (= *Hokma*) herself: her husband's heart drinks from her, for with both (woman/ wisdom) the wise man gets married. In this sense, her arrival may be a gift. In John seven women are mentioned, and seven means plenitude: Jesus' mother (2:1-12), the Samaritan (4:4-12), Martha and Mary (11:1-44 and 12:1-8), his mother's sister, Mary. Cleofas' wife and Mary of Magdala (19:25-27, the last also in 20:1-18), without counting the woman caught in adultery, 7:53-8:11, because of the textual problems the text presents. In the same way, in Pr 9:1 seven columns in the house of wisdom are mentioned. Each one fulfils its role for a more perfect manifestation of wisdom, associated to the *Shekinah* (the Spirit)'s presence in the world.

The Samaritan woman is presented as if representing the whole people that quarrelled with the Jews on account of racial and legal purity. According to 2 Kings 17:29-35 (cf. Ezek 16:45-63), the Samaritans had worshipped other Gods, and married other peoples' women. On the other hand, they did not forgive the Jews who came back from exile and took their old fields back. So contempt and avoidance were reciprocal. The rabbinic tradition underlines this tension, also related to Ishmael's descendents, nowadays the Arabs: "From Abraham, father of my father, was born the impure Ishmael, and all the sons of Qetwah. From Isaac, my father, was born the impure Esau, my brother" (says Jacob in Targum Neofiti). In John itself, the word Samaritan stands as a strong insult towards Jesus (8:48). But in Luke, a Gospel directed to Christians coming from paganism, the Good Samaritan (10:33ff) as well as the tenth healed lepers (17:16) are presented as examples to follow.

In such interpretation, the Samaritan woman could stand for the pagan nations on the way of justification (Saint Augustine), or also for the young Church of the gentiles: and Jesus' dialogue with her could represent the needed pastoral attitude that allows welcoming the gift of Heaven in meeting with different and distant peoples. The woman comes to pull up water. Both symbols go together (cf Song 4:15) and refer to life: it is the woman's task to pull up water from the well. And woman is compared to a spring of water (Prov 5:15.18; Ezek 19:10).

The Water and the Husband

Jesus says her: "Give me to drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman says him: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink from me, a woman from Samaria?" (Jewish do not share things in common with Samaritans). Jesus answered and said to her: "If you knew the gift of God, and who is it that is saying to you: 'Give me to drink', you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

The woman says him: "Lord, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks, drank from it? " Jesus replied and said to her: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. "

The woman says him: "Lord, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." He says to her: "Go, call your husband and come back." The woman answered: "I have no husband." Jesus says her: "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband', for you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" (vv.7b-18).

vv. 7b-9a. Jesus asks her some thing to drink, as he will do again in Jn 19:28, from the cross. With this request, distances are shortened and taboos are broken: "Jesus, as well as Jacob, wants to open the well in order that Samaria, excluded by the Jews, could drink the water of Revelation. He opens this well in order that the antagonism between Jerusalem and Garizim, places of peregrination, could be overcome" (F. Manns). Though a Rabbi would never speak outdoors with a woman, nor waste his time trying to explain the Torah to her, the conversation and its symbolic construction go around wisdom topics, in the brightest hour of the day, unlike the Rabbis who used to study the Torah by night.

The disciples' attitude towards this dialogue (and its content?) will clearly show their surprise. There are two other barriers that Jesus breaks in this dialogue. 1. He speaks to a Samaritan, for whom the usual treatment was contempt or indifference, if not explicit aggressiveness (though the last was not common). 2. He asks to drink from a pagan's recipient, which would contaminate him and make him legally impure. So many connotations are in contrast with the eloquent shortness of the request: "Give me to drink"! There is also the context of intimacy, because the disciples had gone to the city. Against the city there is the lonely place, the desert where Yahweh had talked to the heart of his unfaithful people (Hos 2:16). Jesus even now considers the Samaritans as his people.

vv. 9b-10. The woman expresses her astonishment on hearing a Jew ask her to give to him to drink, perhaps recognizing him by his accent, dress or just seeing he is a traveller. Jesus speaks to her about God's gift, as he spoke earlier with Nicodeme about re-birthing from 'on high' (or 'again'). Here also the "how" (=pos) indicates a double surprise (3:4.9). Then it was by night, now it is in the day; then it was with a studious and law keeping Pharisee, now with a woman who does not belong to the chosen people and wants water: then it was with a

recognized man, now with a despised woman. These cumulative contrasts seem to suggest a spousal context, from which the halfway stages of catechumenal believers are excluded.

Jesus speaks to the woman of living water. The expression does not seem to be justified, because there was there only well water. To the living water (from a spring or a river) is contrasted the Old Testament poverty of Jacob's well, just as in Jn 2:6-7 the insipid water for the purification-rituals (six jars, filled up) are in contrast with the new wine of the husband (cf 2:1; 3:29). We know that from the Temple (according to Ezek 47:1), in the eschatological times, there must spring living water, as there was in Eden (Gen 2:8-10) or in the garden of love (Song 4:12-15). In the feast of Tents Jesus will proclaim something like that about himself, and for anybody who believes in him (Jn 7:37-39). In fact, from his breast will spring blood and water (19:34) among the women (19:25): the Fathers of the Church have always seen in these symbols sacramental and mystagogical images of the initiation sacraments (Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine).

v. 11. The woman passes from treating Jesus as a 'Jew' to calling him Lord (*kyrios*), with the respectful connotations that this expression (in contrast with the previous one) had for her. It is true that she had had other 'lords' or '*baals*' with the double human and religious reference the expression has. She asks Jesus where he has the living water, because the well is deep. Her 'Where' question is related to curiosity, as it happened with the first disciples, who also had the question, "Where do you live." The answer is given elsewhere: the living water is Jesus who dwells in the Father's womb (Jn 1:18), and this is the mystery the disciple is called to discover and share (Jn 13:25).

v. 12. The woman cannot think of anybody higher than her father Jacob, as the Jews cannot think of anybody superior to Abraham (cf Jn 8:53). Jacob had given the well from which according to tradition there had always sprung abundant water for the people and the cattle. Abraham had given the Covenant to the community of the Jews, and he was the paradigm of faith for Israel. Nevertheless, the deepest and higher meaning of these allusions will appear in Jesus (Jn 4:26; 8:58).

vv. 13-14. The superiority of the water that Jesus - God's Wisdom - offers (cf. Prov 9:5), like the superiority of his food in comparison with the manna (Jn 6:35.49), is obvious in the fact that the one who drinks from it will not be thirsty again, because it is a water of eternal life. In Wisdom contexts what leads to eternal life is Wisdom (cf Prov 1-4), and the wise person's life is compared to a tree growing in the bank of the river that never fails to give fruit (Ps 1:3). Rabbinic Judaism will compare the sayings of the Torah and the doctors to water (Abot 1, 11) and the disciples drink from it (Abot 1, 4). On the contrary, those who look for other gods or other teachings foreign to the Law corrupt and lose themselves (cf. Prov 1:4-7). The foreign teachings and wisdom (for instance, Egyptian or Hellenistic, according to the time in the history' of Israel) are compared with a mad harlot, "storming over many waters" (Rev 17:1), and that meets inexperienced people offering them stolen waters and hidden bread (Prov 9:17).

v. 15. The woman asks to drink living water (Jer 2:13; Sir 24:21). There are two different levels in the story. The woman speaks about and understands natural water. Jesus speaks of the religious thirst (Isa 49:10; 58:11; Am 8:11 ff). It may be that she is implicitly asking for the true wisdom, and not for the partial stories "that cannot say what I want" (St John of the Cross). But for this we must choose with decision and go on with endurance: because the living water springs from the depths, after it has been gathered drop by drop.

vv. 16-18. "Go to call to your husband," literally, "your man," a word that is repeated five times in three verses. The husband means the faithful word, but also, the permanent mature conviction (just as the wife meant wisdom). It is the *leitmotiv* around which life is weaved. For this woman, not to have a husband was to remain exposed to changing circumstances and to the strong social censure (cf Song 5:7). Not to have convictions means to be exposed to the relativism of different gods, as it happened with Samaritans (2 Kings 17:21-35), but also with Israel (Hos 3-10). Jesus will be the husband that will call the wife (Song 2:8), as well as the shepherd who calls his sheep, and will be recognized by them as such (Jn 10:4).

At this moment, the Samaritan woman is a foreigner, because she does not yet hear the voice of the shepherd-husband, as Mary of Magdala will do in 20:16-17. Her present sixth man shows her the imperfection of her whole life. She has not yet met the definitive husband, Jesus, the *Logos*, the seventh.

In the previous five men we can also see, according to Origen, a reference to the five books of Samaritan Pentateuch, because they did not accept as revelation the prophetic books, and we can suppose that the woman went further and recognized a deeper and prophetic dimension in Jesus Christ. In this way, the conversation leads from the symbol of water (the life that God offers and to fetch which she came to the well) to the topic of worship (the natural response associated to faith).

The True Worshippers

The woman says him: "Lord, I see you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain and you say that the place for worship is in Jerusalem. "Jesus says to her: "Believe me, woman, that the time comes when neither in this mount nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know: we worship what we know, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him, must worship in spirit and truth. "The woman says him: "I know that the Messiah, the one called Christ, is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us. "Jesus says to her: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (vv. 19b-26).

vv. 20-24. The opening question is: Where must we worship, in mount Gerizim (cf. Gen 33:20; Deut 11:29) or in

Jerusalem? We know that high places, and specially mountains, are the spaces for God's presence (cf. Deut 27:12; Josh 8:33; 1 Kings 18:42; Mt 5:1), and that occasionally they take on eschatological implications (cf. Lk 3:4ff; Rev 6:14; 16:20). In particular, in the Samaritan expectation, the Teheb (a kind of Messiah) would come to explain questions related to true worship. The place of worship was also no secondary question for Israel, because the prophetic preaching had insisted too much on the unity of true worship, as well as in the unification of the cult in the Temple of Jerusalem.

For the Samaritans, even though from John Hircanus times (128 BCE) there was no Temple in Gerizim because he had ordered its destruction; the place had become a pilgrimage centre. Nevertheless, even though true worship and salvation come from the Jews, (because the "Saviour of the world" is a Jew [v.42]), the question will remain secondary, because the "Hour" has arrived, i.e... The established favourable time of Jesus' glorification (Jn 17:1). In this hour the true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. This new worship transcends the question of the worship place, just as the renewal from water and from the Spirit transcends the problem of being born when one is old (as Nicodemus will realize [3:4]). The Father looks for this new kind of worshippers, conceived and born from water and spirit (3:5). This is what Jesus, the Son, also searches for the woman (4:27). The text is emphatic about it: the noun or the verb worship comes up ten times!

vv. 25-26. In the climax of the conversation we find the reference to the Messiah (= *Teheb*, cf. Deut 18:15-18), as the final revealer. After carefully preparing the ground, Jesus announces: "*I am he, the one who is speaking to you!*" As in other passages in John's Gospel, where Jesus takes the place or appropriates the Old Testament symbols of Yahweh, here too, and eminently, he takes the Holy Name of God. Only pronounceable once a year in the Holy of Holies of the Temple by the Great Priest. After his statement, it is obvious that those who do not believe in him will consider him a blasphemer (for instance, 8:59). Even today, in Arab contexts blasphemy deserves death. Moreover, the expression, "the one who is speaking to you," is inconceivable for those who know that no one can see God and go on living (cf. Ex 33:10).

In the middle of the Tent's feast, the Shekinah dwelt among us (cf. Jn 1:14) with less solemnity than in the Temple of Jerusalem. Because the Shekinah is also the Spirit (the Talmud of Babylon replaces Shekinah with Spirit), her presence became near in Jesus. This was the final mystery that must to be revealed, and for this reason it turns up in eschatological contexts (Zac 2:14ff; Rev 7:15; 13:6; 15:5; 21:3). The way for God's arrival is similar to that of the Gospel prologue (1:1.14): the Word / Wisdom (*Logos - Hokma*), was God and it was in God and became flesh.

The Return of the Disciples

Just then the disciples came, and they were astonished that he was speaking with a woman. Nevertheless, nobody said to him: "What do you want?" or, "What do you talk with her about?" Leaving the water jar the woman went back to the city and told the men: "Come and see a man who told me all that I did. Is he, perhaps, the Christ?" They went out of the city and walked towards him".

In the meanwhile, the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat." But he told them: "I have a meal to eat that you do not know." The disciples spoke among them: "Has anybody brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and complete his work. Do you not say, 'Still four months and the harvest arrive?' Well I tell you, look around you and you will see the fields that are white for the harvest. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps'. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured and you have entered into their labour (vv. 27-38).

vv. 27-30. The disciples come back and are astonished on seeing him talking with a woman, not only because a Rabbi should not waste his time talking with women, and less still in public places, but also because there is a tension between the dignity of the expected Messiah and the situation of this infamous woman, an image of deprived paganism. The dialogue had been more than satisfactory, but the disciples stood astonished. Nevertheless, nobody asked him, "What do you want": this question had been put by Jesus to the first disciples, before they replied with another question, "Where do you live?" (1:38). Jesus will look for Lazarus, who is in the tomb (11:34), while here he looks for the woman who has not man or any authentic convictions. And he does this in the same way the Father looks for worshipers in spirit and truth. Jesus wants to share God's life, stimulating faith in people by means of the signs he does (20:20-31).

Such faith seems to have already sprung in the woman, who left the water jar and ran to meet her people and tell them what happened: "Come to see" (cf. 1:35-51). It is amusing to see her going enthusiastically to the men and say that she met "a man" who was honest with her. But, furthermore, she goes to the city like Jonas to Nineveh (Jon 1:2) to press its dwellers to conversion. In fact, in the wisdom literature, the city is a symbol of external strength and the wise man is dissuaded to trust in it because his strength must be in his heart (Prov 21:22; 16:32). The Samaritan leaves her water jar, perhaps because she thinks of coming back soon with her people, or perhaps because she understood that the water was a sign of a most important thing. Only when we find something absolutely important can we leave such a needful thing as water and go out running under the hot midday sun.

vv. 31-34. The disciples come again into the scene. They come back from the city and press Jesus to eat something. If we go back to the symbol of the city as the opposite pole of trust in wisdom, and we are aware of

the fact that the disciples were in the city to buy food (as in 6:5!), trusting so to say in their own strengths, we see a clear contrast between them and the important recent discovery of the woman. They call him "Rabbi," expressing in this way an insufficient faith (cf 1:38; 3:2; 6:25), and giving him the opportunity to come back to the theme of the theological discourse he had with the Samaritan woman, but now around the symbol of food.

In Jn 6 the subject is developed on the basis of the multiplication of bread. There the Lord makes them consider the insufficient motivations of their following him (6:26-27). In our case, and in a subtler way, Jesus speaks about a food they do not know. It is not the food that, to astonish the disciples, he could have requested or received from the Samaritan woman. It would surely not be a wise thing to eat from the first thing the foreign woman offers! Jesus' food is to do the will of Him who sent him and carry out His work to completeness: this is what will indeed satisfy him. The affirmation not only agrees with John's theology about Jesus sent by the Father (cf Jn 5:30; 6:38), but also with theology of the letter to the Hebrews (cf. Heb 10:5-7), where the true worship is established by Jesus, entering by his obedience, once for ever, in God's Holy Presence (9:1-10:18).

vv. 35-38. After this soteriological statement, there is the metaphor about sowing-harvesting, in the context of abundance and joy (Is 9:2). Here not only is the six-month waiting time shortened to four, but also it is suggested that the harvest is already ripe. This meant that somebody had to sow before them (for instance, John the Baptist, in 1:29.36). Nevertheless, there is always a complementary function of those who sow and those who harvest, both of them enjoying the fruits: the husband and the husband's friend (3:29).

Jesus allows the disciples to see that they harvest where they do not sow. But this is coincident with the blessing promises made to the first Covenant people (cf Dt 11:22ff), when Yahweh would quite easily make them take possession of the fruit they have not worked for (Jos 23:8-11), and with the images of hope in Isa 9:1 ff. Lastly, the harvest has always eschatological implications, and though it may include menacing considerations (Joel 4:13; Mk 4:1 -9.6-29; Mt 13:24-30; Rev 14:14-16), in this case, the text only speaks about what is collected, and not about what is thrown or lost (cf. Mt 13:30). Evidently, we are in the times of the fulfillment: the Messiah has indeed arrived, and it has happened in a more astonishing way than we expected (Isa 31:3; 59:21). The reference to the white colour of the harvest confirms us in this conviction, for whiteness is associated with the resurrection / transfiguration (cf. Jn 20:12; Mk 16:5; 9:3).

The Conversion of Samaria

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all everything I have ever done." When they arrived where he was, the Samaritans asked him to stay with them. He stayed two days and they were many more who believed, because of her words, and they said to the woman: "It is not because of what you have said that we believe; we ourselves understood and know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world" (v. 39-42).

The coming of the Messiah and the harvest happens at the same time as the coming to faith of the Samaritans. The adjectival phrase "many more" is symbolic, because Samaritans generally never took to the Christian faith in a big number, if what Acts 8:4-8 tells us about a mission to Samaria is true. This text speaks of the coming to faith of a gentile church, which in this case happens in two moments: first, after the woman's witness, who instead of continuing to act as a sinner is changed and brings her people to faith, leading them to him and to live in truth; second, by what the Samaritans themselves hear and see. In fact, after two days of Jesus' stay with them at their request (that is, the time necessary to enable them to have the paschal experience of faith on the third day), they came to the conviction, by direct experience, without needing to rely on the report of the woman's witness, that Jesus is "truly the Saviour of the world". They believed in him as the disciples and the family of the Roman functionary in Cana (2:11 and 4:53), or, specially, the people of Nineveh (Jon 3:1ff) believed.

The expression "truly" is in opposition to the "lie" (Jn 8:44.55): the "lie" is what stands actively against the truth. Jesus' words are really true because of the witness he offers (5:31-32): especially the witness of the signs the Father allows him to do (5:36-41). The title "Saviour" is not too frequent in the NT. Nevertheless, "Saviour of the world" is the seventh name which, in harmony with the seven women, the seven columns of wisdom's house mentioned above, and the seventh husband, evokes *in crescendo* the mystery of the incarnated wisdom.

The story has already made reference to Jesus with the expressions Jew (v.9), Lord (vv 11.15), greater than the patriarch Jacob (v. 12), a prophet (v. 19), the waited eschatological Messiah (vv. 25-26.29) and the one that the Father sent for his work (v. 34). On the other hand, from a rhetorical perspective, "Saviour of the World" corresponds very well with "source of water that springs for eternal life": both expressions make reference to an absolute plenitude: the later in reference to revelation, and the former with regards to faith.

We conclude, then, that this confession of faith, made "in spirit and truth," in the Samaritans' mouth, consummates the marriage of Jesus with the church of the gentiles, of those who are out and "other," coming to the new Jerusalem (cf. Isa 60:1 ff), making universal the presence of the *Shekinah*, in the symbolic horizon of Rev 21:1ff.