

The Woman of Samaria

Interpreting Scripture—Part 2

This is the second part of a three-part series on how to correctly interpret scripture. Our text will be taken from John 4, dealing with the woman of Samaria, sometimes called the Woman at the Well.

There are many wonderful truths in this story, but we are only going to focus on one: *the woman herself*. We will not answer any questions, and we will learn nothing of the woman's true identity and status.

You may ask, what is the point? This exercise will teach us to make deductions based solely on the word of God and nothing else. When we look at the circumstances surrounding this woman, we see multiple marriages and her living with a man. This immediately paints her in a negative light, which has led to numerous sermons regarding her credibility. As we shall see, there is almost nothing in the text to support such conclusions.

Let's read the extract from John 4 that deals with this woman's circumstances:

He said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here." The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband;' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly."

Jesus was already aware of this woman's situation. Why did He ask her to go and bring her husband? *There is no answer*. We can only speculate:

- To make the woman think about her own situation that Jesus already knew about.

Again, this is only conjecture—there is no scriptural answer for Jesus' reason for wanting her to bring her husband. What is brought to light is the woman's past history of relationships. However, the *reasons* why one ended and another begun is not discussed. This is where men get into trouble—they *assume she has sinned in these relationships*, either through adultery or frivolity.

Let us consider:

- Jesus never accuses her of being a prostitute.
- Jesus never accuses her of being immoral.
- She was legally married to five previous husbands.
- Nothing is said about the circumstances of why the marriages ended.
- Nothing says the woman committed adultery, which ended the marriages.
- Nothing says she divorced them or they divorced her.

For all we know, she preferred military men, who were all killed in battle. Perhaps she had some disease she kept hidden, that when discovered by her husbands, they sought divorce. *The bible just doesn't say!*

Further points to consider are:

- Being married five times, with an ongoing sixth arrangement, implies that she was an elderly woman. The solicitation, courtship, etc involved in establishing a long-term relationship takes time. Five marriages did not take place in mere weeks or months.
- It's unlikely that she would be been found living in adultery with a sixth person after being married to five previous husbands. If she was indeed an older woman, she was too old to rock 'n roll. We forget that in the 1st Century, being a widow without relatives was tantamount to a death sentence.
- If she was committing fornication, Jesus never mentions it.
- Her testimony carried sufficient weight with the people of her city to cause them to believe Jesus to be the Messiah. (John 4:39-42) It's highly unlikely that her neighbors would have been so responsive if she was a common streetwalker.
- When she acknowledged Jesus to be a prophet, the first thing that she brought up concerned issues of worship and religion. If she had been a woman of such low esteem, it's unlikely that this would have been foremost in her thoughts.¹
- She is the only private person to whom Jesus declared to be the Christ. (John 4:26)

Again, this is mostly guesswork, but you can see that no direct conclusions can be made of this woman's character, either good or bad. The point here is to warn against drawing conclusions without having all the facts.

Where we get into trouble is when we start coloring scripture with our own life experiences, by what some preacher told us, or misunderstanding the historical context. Preachers are men; they are fallible. When Paul preached to the Bereans, they went back to the scripture and checked it against what he said. He was an inspired apostle. (Acts 17:11) Today, many won't dare question what our preacher says. Yet scripture commands us to test all things. (1 Thess 5:21) And again, "test the spirits to see whether they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

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¹ Commentators believe that the woman's initial response of worship was a design on her part to make Jesus think differently about her character. This is blatant conjecture.