

# **READING JOHN 4:1-45: SOME DIVERSE HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVES**

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## *I. Introduction*

The present state of NT studies is seemingly headed toward a hermeneutical impasse. The problem of interpreting the NT is one to which we all would like to find a simple unlocking key, an easy formula that would enable us to approach a text and quickly and certainly establish its meaning. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer nor consensus of approaches. It is, however, possible to indicate some diverse perspectives that will enable us to wrestle with the text as we seek to understand it. The problem is not unique to the NT; in fact it is a challenge that faces anyone who would seek to understand anything that somebody else has said or written, especially if communicated in a different language, culture and time period. The NT in general, and the Gospel in John in particular, poses distinct problems because of its own unique and various literary characteristics. In our recognition of these challenges that face us, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are seeking to understand the written Word of God.

Our purpose in this article is to examine some of the problems encountered by interpreters of John's Gospel by focusing our attention on John 4:1-45, the familiar story of the "woman at the well." Following these general observations, we shall attempt to show how diverse hermeneutical perspectives would view key aspects of this passage. We shall examine the passage from three levels or perspectives: 1) an "author-oriented" approach; 2) a "text-oriented" approach;

and 3) a "reader-oriented" approach.<sup>1</sup> In a brief paper of this type, it should be recognized that it is beyond the scope and purpose to do detailed exegesis of the John 4 passage or to discuss the three theoretical bases of the different approaches, though we shall attempt some analysis and evaluation.

## II. *"The Woman at the Well:" Some General Observations*

Following the statement in John 2:25, "He (Jesus) did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in man," The Gospel proceeds to give examples of two very different people that Jesus knew. The accounts in chaps 3 and 4 indicate the different needs and world-views of the people who encountered Jesus. These stories are among the most familiar found in the Gospels. The first concerns Nicodemus, a ruler and teacher of the Jews and the second concerns a Samaritan Woman. Both accounts, in different ways, show the need of all people to come to realize that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (John 20:30-31). Yet, the differences in these accounts are tremendous. These enormous contrasts can be illustrated by the following observations:

	Chap 3 <i>Nicodemus</i>	Chap 4 <i>Samaritan Woman</i>
Place	Jerusalem	Samaria
Time	By night	About 6 p.m.
Occasion	Planned	Visit By Chance
Content	Theological	Practical
Initiator	Nicodemus	Jesus
Ethnic Group	Jew	Samaritan
Social Status	Highly respected ruler/teacher	Despised Woman
Sex	Male	Female

<sup>1</sup> For "author-oriented" approaches, see the discussion in E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); for "text-oriented" approaches, see P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); and "reader-oriented" approaches, see H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (tr. G. Borden and J. Cumming; New York: Crossroad, reprint 1985) and J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena* (ed. and cr. D. B. Allison; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). From the standpoint of biblical studies, a broad survey can be found in the reader by K. McKim, editor, *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

	Chap 3 <i>Nicodemus</i>	Chap 4 <i>Samaritan Woman</i>
Attitude	Serious, polite, calls Jesus Rabbi	Flippant, initially hostile, then respect
Form	Dialogue to monologue	Dialogue throughout
Religious Conviction	Moral, religiously orthodox	Immoral, heterodox, irreligious
Education	Learned	No formal training indicated
Result	Not mentioned	Woman converted, she proclaimed gospel and others came to believe

John 4 opens with an allusion to the threat posed by the Pharisees (4:1,3); There is a proleptic reference to Jesus' rejection (4:44; cf. 1:11), but the rest of the chapter is positive. Jesus is making more disciples than John (4:1). He encounters the Samaritan woman in what is John's fourth account of Jesus' ministry in Cana. The woman, who by Jewish standards had made a mess of her life, was an outcast in society. Into her life enters Jesus with a unique and gentle sensitivity that led the woman beyond any relationship she probably thought was ever possible.<sup>2</sup>

The passage has a clear structure dominated by two major dialogues of Jesus. After the introduction in 1-6, we find the dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. This contains two distinct themes; in 6-18 the living water from Christ,<sup>3</sup> in 19-26 the worship that the Father seeks.<sup>4</sup> The dialogue of Jesus with the disciples in 31-38 is set between two paragraphs, 27-30 describing the witness of the Samaritan woman to the people of Sychar and 39-45 recounting their conversion.<sup>5</sup> The dramatic nature of the second episode has been

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 91, 136-37.

<sup>3</sup> The emphasis in the interpretation of the early church fathers is focused upon the "living water," although the "water" is interpreted in numerous symbolic ways (so Irenaeus, Origen, Cyprian, Cyril, Theodore and Chrysostom). See the discussion in M. F. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1009) 45-49.

<sup>4</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 14-16, focuses on the concept of worship in 19-26 as central to this story. Not only does he find it important for understanding this story, but central to the entire Gospel. On page 14, he says, "I suggest, however, that it may be profitable to consider John 4:19-26 as a further summary of what John intended to achieve in writing his book."

<sup>5</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987) 56-59.

frequently noted. C. H. Dodd likened it to a drama with action taking place on two stages. On the one stage Jesus is conversing with his disciples (31-38), while on another stage the woman speaks to the townspeople of Sychar, and persuades them to come and see Jesus (28-39). The two groups then come together and move to the town; the scene concludes with a declaration of the people of Sychar, like the final chorus of a play, summing up the movement of the whole.<sup>6</sup>

### III. *Challenges Facing Interpreters of John 4*

An initial, and important, stage in understanding the text is a study of the background of the passage.<sup>7</sup> After the interpreter translates the passage, the geography of the text's setting, the historical state of Jewish-Samaritan relationships and other cultural matters must be considered. This step is more important for those who seek to interpret the passage from the standpoint of the biblical author than for those who choose to emphasize the reader's perspective. Also beneficial will be a knowledge of the book's author/editor and his community, as well as the intended audience. Similarly it is important to have an idea of the author's possible sources. With regard to this matter in our present story we must ask where did our author obtain this particular account? Some parts of the story contain a private conversation between Jesus and the woman. The interpreter must seek to determine which of these two passed the story on to the author? If it was both, did the story take different shapes and emphases? Has John created the story or shaped it in a manner he thought appropriate? These are different questions and are relevant to the historical nature of the account. Do we have a historical report about an actual conversation or a narrative developed by the evangelist to bring out points which he thought important for his readers or a mixture of these two?<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953) 315.

<sup>7</sup> I am deeply indebted to the work of I. H. Marshall at this point. See Marshall, "The Problem of New Testament Exegesis" *JETS* 17 (1974) 67-73; also see Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Johannine scholars differ over these questions. Note R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, (tr. G. R. Beasley-Murray; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), who tries to distinguish between tradition and Johannine additions. He finds little historical material in the fourth gospel, On the other hand, R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB; 2 vols; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) affirms that, the narrative rests upon tradition and the tradition has a historical basis. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) and L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) in general affirm the historical nature of the Johannine accounts. "Text" and

The next question for the interpreter is an identification of the genre of our text.<sup>9</sup> Having recognized John 4 as narrative discourse, we must ask what is the form and function of the narrative? This leads to questions regarding the purpose of the story in the overall Gospel, its place in the Gospel and its literary context.<sup>10</sup> Many understand the final verses in chap 20 as representative of the Gospel's overall purpose, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). Understanding this purpose, our account in John 4 is not just a moving story, but it must be seen to function within the Gospel's overall purpose. This, however, still leaves many questions unanswered.

Is the story of the Samaritan woman to be read in light of chap 3 indicating that all kinds of people need to know and respond to the Gospel message?<sup>11</sup> Perhaps a similar function is to show that non-Jews (Samaritans) can also participate in the blessings of the Gospel.<sup>12</sup> A. M. Hunter has suggested the point of the story is the contrast between the old ways of the Jews and the Samaritans--symbolized by water in wells--and the new life offered by Jesus and symbolized by the living water.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps all of these insights are valid and add fullness to our understanding of the story.

Once we understand the function of the passage, we can press further questions about the form and meaning of the story. If the text is a historical narrative, does this mean it has to be understood literally? If we attempt to understand the text from the author's standpoint, does this mean we cannot read the text symbolically, typologically, allegorically, or existentially? Are multiple meanings

"reader" approaches tend to be less concerned with historical questions though Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 236, asks whether "his story" can be true if it is not "history."

<sup>9</sup> Cf. C. H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel?: The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> The best understanding of the form and function of the narrative in John's Gospel is found in Culpepper, *Anatomy*. An insightful perspective on the purpose of the fourth gospel can be found in D. A. Carson, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:31 Reconsidered" *JBL* 106 (1987) 639-51.

<sup>11</sup> Many interpreters take this approach following the great Anglican commentator, B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: John Murray, 1892) 67ff.

<sup>12</sup> J. Marsh, *The Gospel of St. John* (PNTC; Marmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> A. M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to John* (CBC; Cambridge: University Press, 1965). This echoes many of the approaches found in the early church fathers. See n 3 above.

possible? Are multiple meanings intended by the author?<sup>14</sup> We shall look at some of these issues in the next section.

#### IV. *Various Hermeneutical Perspectives*

##### A. *Author-Oriented/Historical Perspective*

This hermeneutical approach seeks to discover what the text meant in the mind of the original author for the intended audience. Such interpretation attempts to discover the meaning of the passage in its literary and historical context. This produces a dialogue relationship between chap 4 and the entire Gospel in its literary settings as well as the event and its historical background.

The Johannine intention appears to be threefold: 1) to proclaim the gift of the "living water," 2) to prioritize the worship of the Father "in Spirit and in truth," and 3) to explain the mission to non-Jews. These are all bound together by the ministry of Jesus Christ, which includes tasks of revealing God, redeeming humankind and mediating between God and his people.<sup>15</sup> The point of the pericope is that the woman had no understanding of what it meant to drink the living water till it dawned on her, however inadequately and crudely, that she stood face to face with the one who "will make known everything to us"--the Messiah. John intended his readers to understand that she drank the "living water" and thus entered into a new relationship with Jesus and that her fellow townsfolk did so as well (vv 39-42).<sup>16</sup>

Jesus revealed himself to her, "I am the Messiah" (v 26), in a most unusual way. It was his clearest self-declaration of his person and mission found in the Gospel. Normally in Jesus' ministry, he veiled his identity and his office by use of other sayings like "Son of Man." In Galilee and Judea (cf. John 6:15), his messianic claims would have been misunderstood in political terms. But with the Samaritans, the dangers of revolt by national zealots were not problematic.<sup>17</sup> John has presented the woman persistently attempting to avoid the issues that

<sup>14</sup> R. Shedd, "Multiple Meanings in the Gospel of John" *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, (ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 249-58. For instance, the word "living" used to describe the water that Jesus offers to the woman can mean "running" as opposed to stagnant or still water. Perhaps this misunderstanding is a key to proper understanding in the story. How can this be communicated in the translation? Is double meaning the key to understanding Johannine misunderstandings? See D. A. Carson, "Understanding Misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel" *Tyn Bul* 33 (1982) 59-91; and Barrett, "Paradox and Dualism" *Essays on John* 98-115.

<sup>15</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>17</sup> Morris, *Gospel According to John*, 273.

Jesus raised. But equally persistent, Jesus re-raised the issues for her until the desired results were secured. At first glance, she caught sight of a thirsty man, she was startled when a Jew spoke to her and she indicated her dislike of the Jew and her flippancy toward religious matters. Finally, however, she was swept off her feet by the prophet and she came to adore, worship and proclaim Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

### B. *Text-Oriented Approach*

Johannine scholars such as C. H. Dodd, Alan Culpepper and Paul Duke have detected a kind of dramatic form in the way the story is told.<sup>18</sup> The story is presented like a play on two stages with the center of interest shifting to and fro from the well to the town, from the woman to the townspeople to the disciples.<sup>19</sup>

It might also be observed that John 4 finds many parallels with chap 19. R. H. Lightfoot has noted that the same time (the sixth hour--4:7; 19:14) indicates a close theological relationship.<sup>20</sup> In both chapters we read of Jesus' physical distress (4:16; 19:1) and of his thirst (4:17; 19:28). Both chapters make reference to the completion of his work (4:34; 19:30 where we find related Greek verbs for "complete"). In 4:42, Jesus is called "the savior of the world" and John may accordingly be recalling particular incidents which point to the passion where salvation for humankind was provided.

Duke finds intertextual keys to understanding the drama.<sup>21</sup> He observed the situation is precisely that of some OT stories in which a man meets a woman at a well (Gen 24:10-61; 29:1-20; Exod 2:15-21).<sup>22</sup> The common themes and structure can be identified: 1) a man is traveling in a foreign land; 2) he goes to a well; 3) he meets there a maiden; 4) water is given; 5) the woman hurriedly runs home to tell; 6) the man is invited to stay; and 7) a betrothal is concluded. When Jesus ventures into a foreign country and meets a woman at a well, the properly conditioned reader of the text will immediately assume some overtone of courtship, especially since this narrative follows a story attributed to the bridegroom (2:11), a title given to Jesus in 3:29. While the woman is ignorant of Jesus identity, the reader knows that

<sup>18</sup> Dodd, *Interpretation*, 315; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 136-37; P. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 100-103.

<sup>19</sup> See Culpepper's approach (*Anatomy*, 72-73) where he finds a similar type drama in John 9.

<sup>20</sup> R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956) 122.

<sup>21</sup> Duke, *Irony*, 101.

<sup>22</sup> R. C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 41-43; N. R. Bonneau, "The Woman at the Well: John 4 and Genesis 24" *The Bible Today* 67 (1973) 1252-59.

Jesus is the Christ, the Logos, the Bridegroom who will win this woman to himself.

The text is irony-filled as exemplified by the initial scene in the drama. Jesus greets the woman with, a request for water (cf. Gen 24:12), which is most ironic in view of who will eventually give water to whom. Jesus is a Jewish male conversing with a Samaritan female. He has burst the bonds of his people's circle so that the woman herself is taken-back. Jesus does not answer her objections, instead he suggests that she does not know the one talking with her (v 10). The emphasis on her ignorance serves dramatically to increase the sense of difference between them. The woman misunderstands ὕδωρ τὸ ζῶν (spring water, running water, living water) reminding him she lacks the necessary vessel to carry it. Jesus notes that his gift of water relieves thirst forever, the woman, impressed, but confused, replies "κύριε (sir, lord) give me this water that I may not thirst anymore, nor come here to draw" (v 15).<sup>23</sup> The element of the gift of water in the betrothal scene has been elaborated in an eight-verse interchange by means of irony, double meaning and misunderstanding. As Duke has noted,

Such expansion functions not only to underline the symbolic significance of water, but also to mark the gradual and inexorable movement of the two characters toward each other. In the betrothal type-scenes the drawing of water is the act that emblematically establishes a bond-male-female, host-guest, benefactor-benefited. In elaborating Jesus offering of water and the woman's dawning (though misdirected) desire for it, the author (the text dramatizes how Jesus draws her to himself).<sup>24</sup>

The next scene creates new interest. Jesus asks her to get her husband and she replies that she has none. This is what is to be expected in this type of scene, but there is a unique turn in the conversation by Jesus' new revelation that startles the woman and readers alike. She is unmarried but not because she is a maiden, but because she has been divorced five times and is currently involved with another man, who is not her husband. The scene thus ironically differs from the Old Testament parallels. The OT scenes feature a *na'ara* (a young woman whose virginity is assumed, Gen 24:16). Yet, when the heavenly Bridegroom plays this scene, his opposite turns out

<sup>23</sup> Significantly, she addresses him as *kurie*-meaning for now, "sir," but for Christian readers and progressively for herself, "Lord." *Kurie*, may also, interestingly enough, mean "husband" (Gen 18:12 LXX; I Pet 3:6). See Brown (*John I*, 170) who observes the likely progression in the woman's use of *kurie* in II, 15, 19; also see W. Foerster, "*kurios*" *TDNT* (1965) 3.1043. See Duke, *Irony*, 101-2.

<sup>24</sup> Duke, *Irony*, 102.

to be less than a virtuous young maiden. He identifies himself in this action, not with innocence, but with a guilty, wounded, downhearted and estranged person, typical of fallen humanity.

The next scene focuses upon Jesus' identity. She seeks, unsuccessfully, to change the subject and speaks of the Messiah in the third person. She does not realize Jesus is the Messiah himself. The scene closes with Jesus' revelation that he is the Messiah. As she exits, the disciples return from their meal and the woman goes to tell the village people about her encounter with Jesus.

This approach is related to and focuses upon the text, its context and broader biblical texts. Reading the text in this fashion is not symbolism or allegory, but it may exceed the intention of the author as well as possibly, though not necessarily, imply that such an encounter did not really transpire. It also raises the question about the proper use of modern literary theories to understand ancient texts.

### C. Reader-Oriented Approaches

1. *Allegorical/Symbolical*. Early Church fathers, especially the Alexandrians, read this story and most other biblical accounts from an allegorical perspective.<sup>25</sup> An example of this interpretation can be found in the mention of the woman's five husbands. It has been suggested that the husbands represent the five false gods of the Samaritans (cf. 2 Kgs 17:30) and this relates to the condemnation of Samaritan piety in John 4:22.<sup>26</sup>

A favorite task among the allegorical readers is the identity of the "water." Water is understood not as real water, but as a variety of religious symbols.<sup>27</sup> Interpreters of different time periods find relevant and understandable symbols that communicate to their various readers.

2. *Existential*. Another school of thought interprets the story existentially through the framework of Heidegger. The story is read as an expression of the way a person comes to self-awareness regarding his or her being and enters into *authentic existence*. R. Bultmann

<sup>25</sup> See the excellent analysis of this approach in J. W. Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third Century* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983) 87-129.

<sup>26</sup> E. C. Hoskyns and F. N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947) 242-44.

<sup>27</sup> See Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel*, 46-49; Brown, *John*, 1, 178-80; and G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 257-58, for helpful comments on the symbolism of "water" and its relationship to the Holy Spirit and to the eschatological eternal life.

describes vv 16-19 as "revelation as the disclosure of man's being."<sup>28</sup> The ideas of a gift of salvation and of faith in the traditional sense disappear, and are replaced by categories drawn from existentialist philosophy.<sup>29</sup> I, along with many, would conclude that this is a reading into the text, not an appropriate reading of the text.<sup>30</sup>

3. *Pastoral*. A very popular reading of this story is to see it as an example of how Jesus dealt pastorally with the woman in leading her to conversion.<sup>31</sup> It is seen as an example of sensitive, gentle, pastoral ministry. It is pointed out that Jesus did not violate her selfhood in leading her to understanding.<sup>32</sup> The story, then is seen as a model for Jesus' followers in succeeding generations of how to employ their own activity of personal evangelism.<sup>33</sup>

4. *Feminist*. In the contemporary world of NT scholarship, perhaps the ultimate example of a reader-oriented approach is that offered by some feminist biblical scholars such as L. Russell, E. Fiorenza and others. This should be distinguished from evangelical feminism which seeks a more objective understanding of the text. The hermeneutical concerns of these contemporary feminists are beyond attempts to see women as equal to men. They are also concerned about matters beyond finding balance in translation to avoid sexist language and questions regarding patriarchal readings in the biblical text. Rather, these scholars proceed from the vantage point that oppressive, male-dominated, biblical texts cannot claim to be the Word of God and so must be the words of men. This hermeneutic of liberation either reads biblical texts from a feminist perspective or rejects the accounts if the feminist reading cannot be attained.<sup>34</sup> For these readers, the significance of the John 4 story is that it shows that Jesus' mission was extended by women, especially to non-Israelites. Women were the first non-Jews to become members of the Jesus movement. The Samaritan woman's attempts to turn the conversation away from Jesus' directions indicate her stand "against limiting the

<sup>28</sup> Bultmann, *John*, 187.

<sup>29</sup> See J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb, Jr., *The Later Heidegger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

<sup>30</sup> See R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, translated by C. Hastings (3 vols; New York: Seabury, 1982) 1, 420.

<sup>31</sup> G. L. Borshert, *The Dynamics of Evangelism* (Waco: Word, 1976) 61-62.

<sup>32</sup> G. L. Borchert, *Assurance and Warning* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987) 106-107.

<sup>33</sup> W. Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel* (2 vols; London: Macmillan, 1940) 1.65-68.

<sup>34</sup> Ct. E. S. Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

inclusive messianic table community of Jesus to Israel alone."<sup>35</sup> This theological argument from the mouth of the woman signifies the historical leadership women had opening up Jesus' movement and community to non-Israelites. The woman is thus representative of an exemplary disciple: an apostolic witness.<sup>36</sup>

Feminist interpreters, in general, are reacting to the type of interpretation employed by the likes of A. Edersheim in his classic volume, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*.<sup>37</sup> Edersheim grounds, the Samaritan woman into the dust with little justification, referring to her in pejorative terms of indignant poverty and ignorance. He then adds in condescending fashion that those who know how difficult it is to "lodge any idea in the mind of the uneducated rustics in this country will understand how utterly at a loss this Samaritan country woman must have been to grasp the meaning of Jesus."<sup>38</sup> Evangelical feminists are quick to point out how little evidence is in the biblical text regarding her supposed stupidity. She may not have had the education of Nicodemus (John 3), but she at once recognized Jesus as a Jew and showed no ignorance of her own country's history or religion. She grasped the physical level of Jesus' words easily. Her misunderstanding was a spiritual problem, not one of ignorance. And, in fact, she grasped spiritual truths more quickly than did the learned Nicodemus.<sup>39</sup>

All feminists are equally affirming of Jesus' treatment of women by finding specific points in the text that can be emphasized. Without question, Jesus violated common cultural codes to relate to the woman as evidenced by her own response as well as the disciples (his disciples returned and were shocked to find him "speaking to a woman"). These readers note, without hesitation, that it is to a woman that Jesus revealed himself as Messiah in a straightforward way for the first time in the fourth Gospel.

She immediately bore witness of Jesus' messiahship to her villagers. Her testimony carried great weight among the villagers because

<sup>35</sup> E. S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 138.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>37</sup> A. Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (1886; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1965).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* Edersheim's comments about "this country" refer to his own England in the 1880's. I am sure that many had difficulty reading the learned and erudite Edersheim. In his discussion of John 4 alone there is one sentence 129 words long and another 118.

<sup>39</sup> See D. R. Pape, *In Search of God's Ideal Woman* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976) 58-00.

they came out to see Jesus and believed on account of her testimony. It cannot be denied that the biblical text affirms the witnessing role of the Samaritan woman which is underscored by the Johannine language.<sup>40</sup> The villagers "believed because of her word" (ἐπίστευσαν διὰ τὸν λόγον) are nearly identical words to those of Jesus' "priestly" prayer when he prays not only for the disciples, "but also for those who believe in me through their word (πιστεύοντων διὰ τοῦ λόγου, John 17:20). Certainly, it can be said that the Samaritan woman preached the "good news" of Jesus (εὐαγγέλιον); thus she was an evangelist. Most likely, these observations have become more obvious because of the concerns of feminist readers. Yet, these final observations are not read into the text, but are read out of the text. They may not have been seen because of the biases of traditional (male?) readings of the Gospel. The ministry of the Samaritan woman is highlighted through the concerns of the feminist scholars, but these final observations, in contrast to Fiorenza's readings mentioned above, are grounded in the text itself and may very well have been a part of the author's purpose in telling this story.

#### V. Conclusions

In this essay, we have examined certain hermeneutical issues involved in seeking to understand John 4:1-45. The task and the various possibilities presented can seem overwhelming and bewildering. Following such a survey of hermeneutical perspectives, we may ask if it is possible to affirm in any sense the doctrine of the perspicuity of Holy Scripture? Hopefully, the result of our outline will not be despair and discouragement. It does, however, affirm and underscore the complexity of the task.

We have noted that following textual, background, linguistic and grammatical concerns, we are still faced with three levels of understanding: 1) the authorial level,<sup>41</sup> 2) the textual level, and 3) the reader level. We are forced to ask if there are valid interpretations at any or

<sup>40</sup> L. Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 189-91; also R. E. Brown, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel" *Theological Studies* 36 (1975) 691.

<sup>41</sup> R. T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970) has noted that at the authorial level, there may be a number of mezzanine levels at which the significance of traditions, sources, and redactors, in addition to the Johannine community must be considered. The narrative material may have had one meaning in its historical setting, another in its traditional development and another for the Johannine community and the author of the canonical text.

all of the levels. Is it possible that levels two or three consciously are not a part of the Johannine purpose, yet still provide valid insights consistent with his overall message?

It seems that an important distinction must be made between exegesis and hermeneutics, terms often confused or used synonymously. Exegesis must be limited to the authorial level as it seeks to discover what the text meant in the mind of its original author/editor for the intended audience. Exegesis seeks to account sufficiently and adequately for the historical and literary features of the text in its context. Hermeneutics on the other hand is an attempt to understand the meaning of the text for the contemporary readers, thus granting the viability of the second and third levels we have considered. The key, however, seems to be in the words mentioned above: are the meanings in levels two and three *consistent* developments of the author's purpose in the text the overall context of the author's entire message? Thus, we certainly can affirm the appropriateness of a textual-level approach. The reader-oriented approach, on the other hand, seemingly opens up endless meanings to texts, limited only by the reader's context, situation and imagination. For instance, we would gladly recognize the "pastoral" reading of the text as an appropriate view of John 4, though perhaps beyond the original intention of John. In light of John's purpose statement in chap 20, the story should be seen from the standpoint of the woman as an unbeliever other than Jesus as an evangelist. Readers are to identify with the woman and acknowledge their own need of Jesus as Savior and Lord. Yet, for believers to identify with Jesus as a model for discipleship is certainly consistent with the overall biblical picture and the Church's historic mission. The feminist readings that shed light on biases and shortcomings of traditional interpretations are welcomed, though the radical feminist approaches, as well as the existentialist perspectives, should be questioned regarding their consistent developments of the Johannine purpose and message.

Does this not leave us with what the Church has historically called the *sensus plenior* in Scripture.<sup>42</sup> Recognizing the Bible as a divine-human book, it is possible, even likely, that inspiration may give a passage a deeper meaning unknown (or at least not fully known) by the human author/editor. For instance, to what degree was Isaiah aware of the glory of Jesus as alluded to by John in 12:41? Would we, in a pre-Christian context, have found the "glory of Jesus"

<sup>42</sup> See s. N. Schneiders, "Faith, Hermeneutics and the Literal Sense of Scripture" *Theological Studies* 39 (1987) 719-36.

in Isaiah's writings in the same way? It certainly appears that divine inspiration adds a fullness to the biblical texts' meaning beyond the human author's own perspective.

What does this say then about an objective reading of Holy Scripture? We want to affirm with Hirsch that the biblical author's meaning is the initial goal of exegesis and hermeneutics. Furthermore, we want to maintain, contrary to Gadamer, that this meaning is discoverable through dedicated effort by the interpreter to reach back and read the biblical text in its original context and settings. Yet, with Gadamer we likewise affirm that our understanding is in some sense limited. We also agree with Gadamer that the text must be expounded for contemporary readers so that they are placed in a position to experience the original impact of the story. What results is a recognition of two important, yet different horizons,<sup>43</sup> or a two-way conversation between ancient text and contemporary reader. The initial concerns must be with the external features of the text and the context in which it was placed. Beyond these are the concerns with the internal life of the text, how the text impacts the present-day audience. We cannot afford to ignore either horizon, nor can we let the contemporary horizon drown the objective meaning found in Scripture. Thus norms and principles essential to historical and literary methodologies are incorporated into the theological interpretation, serving to guide and oversee contemporary significance, exposition and application.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Thiselton, *Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

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