

# Woman of Samaria

Kathleen Kern



## FAITH FOCUS

This story has cultural, historical, and religious facets that we, living millennia and half a world away, will probably never understand, and that may indeed be lost to history.

Nevertheless, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well tells important truths about who Jesus is and who is welcome to partake in Jesus' eternal life. Jesus' life-giving words are not just for the people of his time and his region. In fact, Jesus has a special interest in those outside his culture who welcome what others have rejected.

## GOALS

- In this session participants will:
- Contemplate the meaning of Jesus' living water.
  - Explore ways they, like Jesus, can reach beyond the boundaries of their social group.

## CLASS PREPARATION

Active hyperlinks for this session's preparations are available in the **ABS-Reproducible** Research Assignments List at [www.MennoMedia.org/abs](http://www.MennoMedia.org/abs).

Bring a pitcher of water and a drinking glass for each person.

Find a copy of a St. Photina icon (available through a Google Image search) as a visual focus for this session.

You may wish to research or ask someone to research more deeply into the history of the animosity between Jews and Samaritans. See Ezra 4:1-3; 10:10-11; Ecclesiasticus 50:25-26 (found in the Apocrypha—the "foolish people" living in Shechem are the Samaritans).

# Woman of Samaria

Jo-Ann A. Brant

## UNIT II THE WORD IS HERE AND NOW

**Devotional Reading**  
Revelation 22:10-17

**Background Scripture**  
John 4:1-42

**Key Verse**  
**John 4:14**  
"Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

## SEEKING GOD SEEKING US

We all make assumptions about people on the basis of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Once, after waiting for many hours in an Immigration and Naturalization office, the Hispanic gentleman next to me asked, "Why are you here?" He assumed that I was from the United States and was surprised to learn that I was an immigrant. I then asked him what country he was from. He laughed and said, "I am from Texas." He was there helping a woman who did not speak much English. I came to appreciate the days spent in that waiting room. Our collective boredom, the desire to be accepted, and the fear of rejection put people from all over the world in the same boat.

The Samaritan woman enters into a shared space of equal anticipation with Jesus. Any anxiety she might have about being accepted by God is dispelled when Jesus tells her that a time is coming when true worshippers will worship the Father together, and that God wants both Samaritans and Jews.

Sadly, many of the assumptions that we make impose boundaries between individuals and peoples. We often never get to the point where we discover what hopes and dreams we have in common.

## NOTES

<sup>7</sup>When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” <sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

<sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

<sup>10</sup>Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

<sup>11</sup>“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?”

<sup>13</sup>Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

<sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

<sup>23</sup>“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

<sup>25</sup>The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

<sup>26</sup>Then Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he.”

<sup>28</sup>Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, <sup>29</sup>“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”

<sup>30</sup>They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

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#### HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

##### Monday, April 16

Psalm 1  
Planted by  
streams of water

##### Tuesday, April 17

Psalm 42  
Longing for God

##### Wednesday, April 18

Revelation 22:10-17  
The water of life

##### Thursday, April 19

2 Kings 17:26-34  
The Samaritans’  
heresy

##### Friday, April 20

John 4:16-22  
Worshipping what  
you do not know

##### Saturday, April 21

John 4:35-42  
Fields ripe for  
harvest

##### Sunday, April 22

John 4:7-15,  
23-26, 28-30  
“Come and see”

If you choose to have the passage for today read dramatically by participants, prepare three “scripts” and highlight passages for the woman, Jesus, and narrator. An **ABSReproducible** script is available at [www.MennoMedia.org/abs](http://www.MennoMedia.org/abs) with today’s **ABSOnline** article.

Some of the material for this session comes from the Apocrypha ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_apocrypha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_apocrypha)), so you may wish to bring a Bible that contains the Apocrypha to class, or look up passages online. The Oremus Bible (<http://bible.oremus.org>) includes the Apocrypha in its word and passage searches. The book of Tobit in the Apocrypha will be used in the next session as well.

If you know someone in your congregation who is very familiar with Mennonite mission history (or the mission ministries of your denomination), ask him/her how missions have changed over the years to become more culturally appropriate. An interesting story about reaching people with culturally appropriate music is available at <http://www.mennonite-mission.net/Stories/News/Pages/MusicthebloodofAfricanchurchlife.aspx>.



#### STEPS THROUGH THE SESSION

##### 1. Session focus

Put a pitcher of water and water glasses on a table. Display an icon of St. Photina—whom Orthodox Christians revere as the Samaritan woman—printed out, or available for viewing on a laptop.

##### 2. Sharing our stories

Ask the group to reflect on contexts in their lives where they felt or feel like outsiders. Invite them to briefly name the situation without going into detail.

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### 3. Reflecting on our stories

Read Brant's opening story, "Seeking God Seeking Us" (*Adult Bible Study*, p. 44).

- Ask people to imagine—What would need to happen for you to feel like an "insider" in the situation you thought of?

### 4. God's Story and Vision

Since Brant refers to the entire passage of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, you may wish to read all of John 4:7-30, using the **ABSReproducible** readers theater rather than the abbreviated text in *Adult Bible Study*, page 45. Have one class member take the part of Jesus, one take the part of the Samaritan woman, and one take the part of narrator to read John 4.

### 5. Interacting with God's Story and Vision

#### A. Who? Me? (John 4:7-9) (*Adult Bible Study*, p. 46)

Before discussing this section, give some insight into the historical enmity between Jews and Samaritans. Before the exiled Jews in Babylon returned to Jerusalem, they had done a lot of thinking about why Jerusalem was destroyed. They remembered how Solomon changed once he married foreign wives who worshipped other gods. The prophets warned them about where their idolatry would lead, and when Jerusalem fell, the exiles vowed that they would never put themselves in a position again where they would worship idols.

That laudable intention unfortunately led to a sort of racism. It did not matter if the Samaritans wished to worship the same God with them; they were impure because of their ancestry. The books of Ruth and Jonah were written during this period.

- How do these books address the issue of racism? (Hint: Part of the significance of Ruth has to do with her descendants.)



### EXPLORING GOD'S STORY AND VISION

John's story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritans recalls a number of episodes in the Old Testament. In the stories of Rebekah and Isaac, Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Zipporah, when a man meets a woman at a well, hospitality and matrimony follow. John's story has a few bumps on the road to hospitality, but it ends with the creation of a new family of God's children.

*Who? Me? (John 4:7-9).* Hospitality to strangers was a shared value in the ancient world, but hospitality to one's enemies was a different matter. The Samaritan woman's indirect rebuff to Jesus' rather blunt request for water should be no surprise. Jewish men regarded Samaritan women as perpetually unclean. The Samaritans claimed Abraham as a common ancestor, but the Jews claimed that the Samaritans wandered into the land while the Jews were in exile in Babylon. In 107 BC, the Judean king destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. The well near Sychar stood within eyesight of its ruins. The woman uses these ethnic tensions to insult Jesus. Jesus may be a Jew and think himself superior, but he is not a good Jew by Jewish standards if he asks a Samaritan woman for a drink.

*Playful banter (John 4:8-15).* The Samaritan woman is capable of witty conversation, and Jesus encourages an exchange of riddles and banter. She has living water; he has better living water. The

*She has living water;  
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water in the well was called living water because the well was fed by underground springs. Naturally flowing water was necessary for Jewish and Samaritan purification rites and temple worship (Leviticus 15:13). Jesus draws from a long tradition of describing God's wisdom, presence, and power metaphorically as living water (e.g., Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13; 1 Enoch 48:1; 49:1).

The Samaritan woman continues the play on words and the battle of wits by responding to his boast with an observation based upon his words' literal, rather than metaphoric, meaning. Jesus has no bucket. She continues to put him in his place and at the same time boasts about her Samaritan heritage by asking if he thinks himself superior to Jacob. When Jesus counters by enhanc-

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ing his boast—the water he offers is so good that whoever drinks will never be thirsty again—the woman brings the game to a halt by calling his bluff. She gives no indication so far that she believes that Jesus can deliver on his offer.

**Setting the record straight (John 4:17-19).** Some interpreters conclude that Jesus exposes the woman’s sin and she becomes repentant. Within the cultural context, however, the woman would have been a victim rather than a wrongdoer. She would have had to be widowed or cast off five times.

Women could not divorce their husbands. Moreover, no man would marry a loose woman. The statement that the man she has (that is, lives with) is not her husband does not necessarily mean that she is living with the man as a husband. He could be a brother or another male relative who had to take her in.

She is a woman who has experienced the shame of great misfortune. We ought not leap to the assumption that she has behaved shamefully. The fact that the people of Samaria listen to her suggests that she is not the marginalized sinner that tradition has made her. Noon is not an unusual time to come to a well to get water. Women would have to make the trip many times in a day. Jesus praises her for her truthfulness in saying that she has no husband.

**True dialogue (John 4:20-26).** Jesus’ revelation about her marital status turns the conversation away from witty banter to a serious theological conversation. The woman reveals through her words that worship of God is very important to her. When she recognizes that Jesus is a prophet, she may be wondering if he is the Messiah (the Christ).

In Deuteronomy 18:18, God promises to raise up a prophet like Moses. The Samaritans seem to be expecting a prophet messiah who would come and locate hidden vessels needed to reestablish worship on Mount Gerizim. Therefore, she asks whether the Jewish or Samaritan temple is the proper place to worship God. Jesus predicts a future in which both Jew and Samaritan can worship without a temple, in spirit and in truth.

*Within the cultural context, the woman would have been a victim rather than a wrongdoer. Women could not divorce their husbands.*

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## NOTES

- When have you held attitudes of bias against or contempt for a particular group of people?
- Have you felt you have been held in contempt because of groups to which you belong?
- What can happen when two contemptuous groups reach out to each other?

### **B. Playful banter (John 4:8-15)** (Adult Bible Study, pp. 46–47)

Recall again John’s use of word-play in sessions 4 and 7. You may wish to have the group read the Scriptures to which Brant refers in this section (Leviticus 15:13, Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13; 1 Enoch 48:1; 49:1).

- What do you think is the subtext of the Samaritan woman’s boast about Jacob?
- How do you imagine her tone of voice when she spoke these words?

### **C. Setting the record straight (John 4:17-19)** (Adult Bible Study, p. 47)

After reading Brant’s comments about the possible historical misunderstandings of the Samaritan woman’s character, ask:

- Does this matter?
- Do you think Jesus would have talked to her if she had been a “loose” woman?
- Who are marginalized people condemned by society for immoral behavior?
- What are some hurdles that these people must overcome in order to function in “polite” society?
- What are the sins of the powerful and the sins of the powerless?
- Which are the sins that Jesus addressed most forcefully?

Note as well that most assumptions we make about first-century Palestine are based on observations of Palestinian culture centuries later.

**D. True dialogue (John 4:20-26)** (*Adult Bible Study*, pp. 47-48)

After noting Brant's comment about the spiritual life of the Samaritan woman, ask the group to think again of the marginalized and unfortunate members of society.

- What role does worship play in their lives?
- What are circumstances that cause people to long for a Messiah or the return of a hero from the past?

As the class has discussed before, Anabaptists generally do not associate faith with a place (unless it is a place where a lot of Anabaptists live). Yet, many devout Christians do feel a "spiritual energy" (as one Palestinian Christian told me) at places they consider holy.

- What are some ways we can both uphold the "freedom from spatial constraints" in our worship, but be respectful of other Christians whose faith is bolstered by holy spaces?

**E. Extending invitations (John 4:28-30)** (*Adult Bible Study*, p. 48)

Imagine how the people of this woman's town would have reacted to her news, knowing that Jesus was a Jew, a member of a people who considered Samaritans to be impure half-breeds, idolatrous, and stupid.

- What might be an initial gut negative response?
- What might be an initial gut positive (or curious) response?

You may wish to read Acts 8:26-28 for an account of how the Samaritans were a part of the widening witness of the first-century church.

In keeping with Brant's suggestion that we may wrongly impose immorality upon the Samaritan woman, note that Jesus does not tell her, as he told the woman caught in adultery, "Do not sin again" (John 8:11 *NRSV*).

The phrase "in spirit and in truth" may be a formula used in the early church to refer to Christian worship of both God and Jesus. God is Spirit; Jesus is the Truth (John 14:6 and 15:26). Once worship is freed from spatial constraints, there are no longer boundaries that keep people apart because of national identities and gender. When the woman expresses her wishes about the Messiah aloud, Jesus acknowledges that he is their Messiah. He affirms that he comes to establish true worship rather than Jewish nationalism.

*Extending invitations (John 4:28-30)*. Many interpreters think the woman's abandonment of her water jar is a symbol of her faith that Jesus is the living water. While John takes advantage of symbolism, details also work on a narrative level. Leaving the jar is a gesture of hospitality. Jesus and the disciples now have a bucket with which to draw water from the deep well.

When the woman arrives in town, the exaggerated terms with which she speaks point to her excitement. Her words invite the people to investigate whether Jesus can do what the Messiah is expected to do: explain everything to them. The grammatical structure of her question about the Christ ("He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" v. 29 *NRSV*) expresses the fulfillment of her desire, rather than doubt.

*Leaving the jar is a gesture of hospitality.*



**LIVING GOD'S STORY AND VISION**

1. In the course of Christian tradition, women like the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene were reduced to repentant sinners. The Samaritan woman's marriages become an indication of her loose morality, and Mary Magdalene gets labeled a prostitute. Tradition has long overlooked the role the Samaritan woman plays as a witness to Jesus and how her words lead the Samaritans to welcome Jesus.

- What gets left out of our own faith stories if we ignore the witness of women and people from other ethnic backgrounds?

2. In the Gospel of John, the Samaritan woman and Martha are theologically articulate. Both demonstrate that their deepest desires are for the presence of God in their lives. I hear the excite-

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ment in the Samaritan woman's voice when reading her words. The joy of talking about God pushes aside things like gender and nationality that divide her from Jesus. Dialogue is no longer about winning a game of wits; it is a meeting of minds and a quest for the truth.

- Why is entering into theological dialogue with strangers difficult and even frightening?
- There is a saying that in polite society one never talks about religion or politics. What has made theological discussion unnecessarily inappropriate?

3. In the 2004 film version of the Gospel of John, the actress who plays the Samaritan handles the wit of her lines well, but the filmmakers chose to dress her in dark, ragged clothes with a dirty face. Jesus wears a pristine cream-colored robe. The images reinforce the Jewish stereotypes about Samaritans, even though Samaritans followed purity laws and were as economically and socially sophisticated as Judean society.

- What sort of stereotypes about mission and evangelism get reinforced when we think of Samaria as a backwater?

4. Water is not just as symbol; it is necessary to life. Jacob's well tapped into the largest aquifer (water-bearing rock) in the area. On the geological map of the modern state of Israel, the Palestinian territories (that include the area around Mount Gerizim) sit on top of most of the water. It is ironic for a Jew to offer a Samaritan a drink of living water. Adding insult to injury, the Jews had destroyed the system of pipes that brought running water into the city of Samaria.

Today, water is increasingly treated as property sold only to those who can pay.

- What sort of theological statement do we make when we provide water to those who do not belong on our land, or build water systems for those without means?

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## F. Living God's Story and Vision

(Adult Bible Study, pp. 48–49)

1) As part of discussing Brant's first point, ask the group whether they have been affected by the witness of women and people from other ethnic backgrounds. You might wish to note that U.S. Pentecostals were radically egalitarian from the beginning, with both black and white believers worshipping together in a time when almost no churches did, and with women in leadership roles. That changed as Pentecostals became more accepted into white, mainstream evangelicalism.

- How have Anabaptists changed as we became more accepted by the status quo?

2) As part of discussing Brant's second point, ask:

- When have you wanted to talk about faith matters and were silenced?
- What are some venues or situations where you wish you could talk about faith more openly?

3) As part of discussing Brant's third point, ask:

- How have mission ministries of our denomination changed over the years?
- What are some ways that our missionaries and aid workers have shown respect to the peoples and cultures they have tried to reach?

## 6. Living God's Vision

Pour a glass of water for every person, saying, "Whoever drinks the water that Jesus gives will never thirst."

- What does it mean to you to hear this invitation?
- How can we extend Jesus' invitation to all kinds of people?

Sing, "I heard the voice of Jesus say" (HWB 493, MH 231 or 232).

Distribute research assignments to willing participants for next week's session, listed under **Class Preparation**.