



Believe

JOHN

MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Jesus Subverts the 'Wedding-at-the-Well' Scene

Bible Reading: John 4:4-26, 28-29

[Watch LIVESTREAM at 10am](#)

SUMMARY:

We read John 4 as a 'one-off, stand-alone meeting' between a man (Jesus) & a woman (a Samaritan) at the village well. The first readers read it differently, as the latest in a series of such encounters stretching back to Israel's Patriarchs. Lacking this perspective, we miss insights that were obvious to them. Let's become better Bible-readers by adopting their view. John 4 is ostensibly a 'betrothal type-scene,' where major Bible-characters meet their future spouse. We compare and contrast Jesus' well-encounter with those of Isaac/Rebekah, Jacob/Rachel, and Moses/Zipporah. 'Connecting the dots' raises new issues: Is Jesus the Samaritan woman's '7th man,' her perfect husband? Is she Jesus' 'spiritual &/or symbolic spouse'? We reject such allegorizing. The key issue is: Why does the 4th Gospel subvert this literary device—the OT 'Wedding-at-the-Well' scene?

John 4 evokes the 'OT Woman-at-the-well' Scene

- A. John 4 is not the first 'Women at the Well' Episode
- B. Biblical 'Woman at the Well' Cases (Gen. 24, 29; Ex. 2; John 4)
 1. Isaac & Rebecca at the Well (Genesis 24)
 2. Jacob & Rachel at the Well (Gen. 29)
 3. The "Wedding at the Well" Pattern (Gen. 24 & 29)
 - These stories are incredibly similar! In fact, both of them include the following elements:
 1. Journey: Someone journeys to a foreign country
 2. Woman at the well: Man encounters a woman at a well
 3. Draws water: Someone draws water from the well
 4. News: Woman hurries home to bring news of the visitor

5. Hospitality: Visitor stays with the woman's family & there's mention of a meal
6. Joining: The 2 parties are joined as one—a betrothal/wedding
4. Moses & Zipporah at the Well (Ex. 2:15-21)
5. Jesus & the Samaritan Woman (John 4)
 - Jesus' meeting...at a well begins by following the same pattern as the stories of Isaac, Jacob, & Moses:
 1. Journey: Jesus journeys to Galilee, but passes through Samaria first
 2. Woman at the well: Meets Samaritan woman at a well—'Jacob's well'.
 3. Draws water: Woman comes to 'draw water'—typical well-meeting pattern
 4. But there's a twist. Jesus offers her 'living water' instead of [receiving] well-water.
 - As a betrothal type-scene "John 4...is a *tour de force*. *All the familiar elements of the betrothal-scene are in play*...Yet, the 4th [Gospel] has *twisted the type-scene to potent theological effect*." —Clifton Black

The 'Wedding-at-the-Well,' "Betrothal Type-Scene"

- A. Is John 4 a 'Wedding at the Well' — 'Betrothal Type-Scene'?
 - "According to a *very dominant consensus*...the meeting between Jesus & the Samaritan woman is modeled upon the betrothal scene of the Hebrew [OT] Bible."—Kasper Larsen
- B. 'Type-scene' Links are as important as direct OT Quotations
 - "Jesus' meeting the woman 'at the well' is by no means any less meaningful or a less...intended [*link to the OT*]."—Ed. Gerber
- C. At Crucial Junctures in the Hero's Life
 - "The biblical type-scene occurs...*at crucial junctures in the lives of the heroes*, from conception & birth to *betrothal* & deathbed." —Robert Alter
- D. Importance of Variations & Omissions
 - "A *simple omission or innovation*...in a standard biblical type-scene *may not leap out immediately to the modern reader*, but *would...be...plainly obvious to the text's earliest audience*." —Luke Gartner-Brereton

Does the Samaritan Woman become Jesus' Wife?

- A. 'Wooden Applications' — 'Symbolic/Spiritual Wedding' of Jesus & the Samaritan Woman
 - "Jesus is depicted as entering into a *spiritual marriage* with the Samaritan woman..." —Callum Carmichael
 - "Jesus is the 7th...the perfect man [for the Samaritan Woman]. A *symbolic betrothal* is now suggested"—Mark Stibbe
- B. Critique of 'Wooden Applications' & Jesus' 'Marriage'
 1. Manipulation—"Advocates...manipulate the rest of the symbols in John 4..."— Stephen Um
 - "Having *assumed correlation between the OT betrothal type scenes & the Samaritan narrative*...advocates...*must then manipulate the rest of the symbols...to cohere with what they believe*" is the *inevitable outcome*. —Stephen Um
 2. Allegorical Interpretations—examples
 3. Critique of Allegorical Interpretations
 - "This allegorical & symbolic interpretation of the Samaritan woman has taken hold; yet *it denigrates her* in a way not consistent with the biblical text, and reflects a *lack of sensitivity to the story's historical context*." —James McGrath

Key Omissions & Variations in the John 4 Type-scene

- A. OT Type-scenes Expectations are Disappointed & Diverted
 - "The '*betrothal scene*' *does not lead to a beautiful, consummate marriage* [of] Jesus & the Samaritan woman."—Kasper Larsen
- B. Omissions—what's missing from the type-scene?
 - "No water is drawn. There's no betrothal, nor is there a betrothal meal. These *differences are keys to...understanding*...the author's...[use of] this literary convention."—Lyle Eslinger
- C. Key Variations in the John 4 Type-scene

1. Jesus asks for water & gets none; rather Jesus offers 'living water'
2. The woman's marital eligibility
3. There's no conventional marriage
4. There's no 'spiritual' or 'symbolic marriage'
5. There's no betrothal/marriage meal (4:31-34)

The Subversion of the Betrothal Type-scene

A. 'Wedding-at-the-Well' subverted in John 4

- John's "Gospel....adapts this [Betrothal type-scene] motif...*subverting the expectation* of the audience."—Michael Peppard

B. Betrothal type-scene's Subversion in the OT—King Saul (1 Sam. 9:10-14)

John's 'Betrothal type-scene' Produces Mission & Worship

A. God's Purpose not fulfilled merely by Human Marriage & Procreation

- Jesus' encounter results in "a 'betrothal'...*not in marriage but in worship & in mission.*"—Clifton Black
- "Jesus does not come...for a woman to be his [wife], but for a witness who will...invite...people to himself."—Gail O'Day

B. The Woman's Witness

C. The OT Betrothal Type-Scene is rendered redundant

QUESTIONS:

A. Usually we read John 4 (Jesus & the Samaritan) as a 'one-off, stand-alone' episode. What does reading John 4 as a 'betrothal-at-the-well' type-scene (like Genesis 24, 29) add to our understanding?

B. Compare & contrast the two OT "betrothal-at-the-well" episodes—Jacob/Rachel (Gen. 29) & Moses/Zipporah (Ex. 2:15-21)

1. What are the similarities? How do they fit the "typical pattern" of "Betrothal-at-the-well"?
2. What are the differences? What insight do these differences suggest about the two sets of characters?

C. "The *'betrothal scene'* does not lead to a beautiful, consummate marriage [of] Jesus & the Samaritan woman." So, if there's no betrothal, no marriage, why does the author present this as a "betrothal-at-the-well" type-scene? Discuss.

D. Consider the two statements below:

- Jesus' encounter results in "a 'betrothal'...*not in marriage but in worship & in mission.*"—Clifton Black
- "Jesus does not come...for a woman to be his [wife], but for a witness who will...invite...people to himself."—Gail O'Day
- Do you agree (or disagree) with these statements? Why, or why not?