Go and call your husband and come here” (Jn 4,16). These words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman have not failed to surprise readers of this beautiful chapter in the Gospel of John. Jesus comes to offer the Samaritan woman “the water welling up to eternal life” (4,14). She accepts, saying: “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw water” (4,15). Why then the question about the husband? What connection can there be between the living water and the Samaritan woman’s husband? The narrative of John 4 is full of problems of this kind. Later in the story the Samaritan woman shifts the conversation about her marital life to tackle a theological question debated between the Jews and the Samaritans: Which is the

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legitimate temple, that of Jerusalem in Judea, or that of Gerizim in Samaria (4,20)? When the disciples come back with the food they have bought, they are surprised to see Jesus alone talking with a woman, yet they do not say anything (4,27). In the discussion that follows, the theme is food, sowing, and harvest. Is there a link between what precedes and what follows?

Among the responses proposed by commentators, there are two main kinds. Some draw attention to the history of the text itself with its many redactional stages. The work of different redactors would explain the apparent incoherence of the chapter.¹ Others distinguish different levels of interpretation. The breaks in the plot lead one to a second level of understanding where all the threads are tied together.² In fact, the chapter is a gradual revelation of Jesus, the central character of the scene and the only one who is present from beginning to end.³ The Samaritan woman sees in Jesus a Jew (4,9), then she wonders and asks if he could be greater than Jacob (4,12). Soon afterward she calls him a prophet (4,19). Jesus reveals to her that he is the Messiah (4,26) and the Samaritan woman invites the villagers to come and see if indeed he is (4,30). The chapter ends with this declaration by the inhabitants of Sychar to the Samaritan woman: “We have heard for ourselves and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (4,42). The progression from each affirmation to the following one is clear.⁴ This is a first thread connecting all the parts of the narrative. But is it the only one? Could the plot be only a literary device that must be


²See Fabris, Giovanni, 291-292; 300-301.

³Ibid., 286.

unraveled in order to discover the message of the text, that is to say only a theological construct? In our opinion, it is possible to show that plot and message are more united than is at first obvious. Far from contradicting the explanations that have been previously given, our attempt rather confirms them and deepens them. In order to do this, we must look to the Old Testament.

1. "It was about the sixth hour" (4,6b)

The narrative begins with a journey. Jesus is traveling from Judea to Galilee and is passing through Samaria. He finds himself in a foreign land. Tired, he sits down near a well (4,6). For those who have read the Old Testament, this scene will surely remind them of at least three narratives: that of the mission of Abraham’s servant charged with looking for a wife for Isaac (Gen 24); the encounter of Jacob and Rachel (Gen 29, 1-14); the flight of Moses to the country of Midian and his meeting with the seven daughters of the priest Reuel (Ex 2, 15-22). These three narratives all begin in the same way by describing the journey through a foreign land of a man who ends up near a well. Subsequent events also develop according to a schema followed by all the narratives mentioned. One or more women come to the well. Conversation begins. Either the man asks for water or it is he who at the end of the story offers or gives water to the herd entrusted to the young woman or women. Then the young woman runs home, tells how she has met a man near the well, and the man receives an invitation from the parents of the young woman, who generally offer him a meal. Finally the story ends with a marriage: Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 24), Jacob and Rachel (and Leah) (Gen 29), Moses and Zipporah (Ex 2). The woman who came to the well is the future wife.

Certainly events unfold differently in the story of the Samaritan woman. And the reader can rest assured that this comparison with the Old Testament does not aim to create the impression that John 4 also ends with a marriage. However, the similarities provoke a question: Why is the conclusion of John 4 different? The start of the Johannine narrative conforms to the model which we have found in the Old Testament; and it is reasonable to think that the first readers of John 4 knew these narratives. The gospel of John, as a matter of fact, is filled with allusions to the Old Testament. It is possible to reconstruct, from the indications in the text, the lines which the reader must follow in order to arrive at an understanding of the particular version of the "meeting near the well" which the gospel of John proposes.

The initial detail requires attention: "It was about the sixth hour" says John 4:6, that is noon. It is being made clear that at this hour nobody comes to draw water from the well. Gen 24:11 says clearly that Abraham's servant arrived at the well "at evening time, when women go out to draw water". If the Samaritan woman has to come to draw water at noon, she must have a special reason for doing so at this hour. She comes to the well at the hour when she is practically sure to meet no one there. The women will go there together much later, and it is not difficult to imagine that this time is the occasion for much conversation (Gen 24:11; 1 Sam 9,11). It is also near the well that a traveler is sure to encounter the local people, as in the case of Jacob (Gen 29, 1-6). Why then does the Samaritan woman want to be alone?

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6 R. Brown, The Gospel According to John (3-xvi), coll. Anchor Bible, 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 169; Fabris, Giovanni, 295-296. The Dies Irae seems to have compared the sixth hour of Jn 4:7 with the scene of the crucifixion of Jn 19:28.30 where Jesus is again thirsty: Quaerens me sedisti lassus — redemisti crucem passus — tantus labor non sit cassus. Jn 19,14 notes that Jesus is before Pilate at the sixth hour. See also Mark 14,33.

7 Literally "at the hour when those women who draw water go out". To draw water is a chore normally done by women. See, for example, 1 Kings 9,11. It was also the work of slaves (Dt 29,10; Jos 9,21.23.27). On the Jewish traditions concerning the well of Jacob, see J. NEYREY, "Jacob Traditions and the Interpretation of John 4:10-26," in Catholic Biblical Quarterly 41 (1979) 419-437.
Notice that Jesus is also alone because the disciples have left for the city to buy something to eat (Jn 4,8). The narrative indicates that it is not by chance that Jesus is sitting there at this hour near the well of Jacob. This meeting near the well is far from ordinary. If the scene concludes surprisingly, that is without marriage, it has also begun just as unusually, at a strange hour.

2. “Give me a drink” (4,7)

Abraham’s servant begins his conversation with Rebekah with these words: “Pray give me a little water to drink from your jar” (Gen 24,17). The prophet Elijah, upon arriving at Zarephath, has a similar meeting with the widow with whom he will lodge: “Bring me a little water in a vessel that I may drink” (1 Kings 17,10). The servant of Abraham, before addressing Rebekah, spoke a prayer which revealed his intentions: if the young woman agreed to give water to him and his camels, she would be the wife destined by God for Isaac, his master’s son. The request for water therefore signifies an attempt to discover the intentions of the person one is addressing. The offer of water to the one requesting it signifies welcome. And that is why the conversation continues. In the case of Elijah, for example, the prophet asks for something to eat, then he receives hospitality (1 Kings 17,11-16).

In the context of the meeting near the well, as in the case of Gen 24, giving water signifies becoming involved in something that can lead to marriage. In the gospel of John, by contrast, the Samaritan woman refuses to give water. Jesus then offers himself to her as “the living water” (4,10). The “water” has probably more than one symbolic meaning in this passage. One could give a very simple sense to these words of Jesus: instead of water from the well, he is offering her a spring, that is to say, of “running water.” It must be insisted that the “literal sense” proposed does not exclude the possibility of one or more symbolic senses. It is the attribute of a symbol to unite inseparably two levels of meaning: the “support,” here the “living water,” and

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*Fabris, Giovanni, 296.*
the symbolic reality, the "gift of God" (4,7). The gospel of John is certainly no exception.¹⁰

Now let us return to the Old Testament. Jesus, in offering water, acts like Jacob and Moses who, in the versions of Gen 29 and Ex 2, give water to the herds of their future wives. In these two cases it is the future husband who gives the water. We should cite a text which will later be seen to be relevant to the present topic, the case of the unfaithful spouse in Hos 2,2-23.¹¹ In the course of his plea to her the husband, who is God, cites the words of his wife: "For she said: 'I will go after my lovers who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink'" (2,5). In this text, the unfaithful wife wrongly believes that she receives those gifts from her lovers when they really come from God (2,8). Without pressing too much the parallelism between Hos 2,5 and Jn 4,7, "giving water" suggests the revelation of the future husband or the real husband. It can also be added that the lovers whom the prophet Hosea talks about are the Baals — a Hebrew word which means "master," "husband" — one of whose principal roles in the Canaanite religion was to procure fertility for the land by granting rainfall. Water, husband, Baal, lover, fertility, unfaithful spouse: this constellation of themes in Hosea 2 are all found also in John 4.

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³For the symbolic meaning of water, see Fabris, Giovanni I, 298-299. In the Jewish world, the "gift of God" and "living water" are two metaphors for the law; the living water perhaps symbolizes divine revelation or the spirit of God. See also Brown, John I, 178-179; Schnackenburg, Johannesevangelium I, 462-464, 466; M. Girard, Les symboles dans la Bible. Essai de Théologie biblique enracinée dans l'expérience humaine universelle, coll. Recherches. Nouvelle Série 26 (Paris: Cerf, 1991) 233-297.

¹⁰For the Johannine symbolism see, among others, C.H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), 133-144: the world of John is "a world in which phenomena — things and events — are a living and changing image of the eternal and not a veil of illusion to hide it, a world in which the Word is made flesh" (p. 143).

3. “Go, call your husband and come here” (4,16)

This command of Jesus is now less surprising, since from the beginning marriage has been part of the background of the meeting near the well. In accepting the “living water,” the Samaritan woman enters into a dynamic leading naturally to marriage. That is why it is not surprising that Jesus stops her and asks her if she can account for what she is saying. There must be no room left for equivocation. We already know what follows: the reader understands that the woman has had five husbands and that she is living with a sixth man to whom she is not married.

Six: the woman has known six men, and the narrative also talks about the sixth hour; and there were six stone jars at the wedding at Cana (Jn 2,6). It is always difficult to give an explanation of the numbers in the Bible. We need to exercise moderation in this matter. It is at least possible to say that six is an imperfect number. The perfect and sacred number is seven. In a series of seven, the seventh element is always of an order different from the preceding six. Thus, it is the seventh day of the week which God himself sanctified (Gen 2,1-3). In this case could a seventh husband be waiting? That would be a surpris-

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12 See, for example, J. Bligh, “Jesus in Samaria,” in Heythrop Journal 3 (1962): 329-346, spec. 335-336; Brown, John I, 171, is skeptical. But the allusions to these texts of the OT are too many to be accidental.

13 See Fabris, Giovanni, 300, which insists on the “matrimonial” background of the text.

14 The Jewish law did not permit three successive husbands (Yebamot 64, baraita). There is probably a willful exaggeration in the narrative (Fabris, Giovanni, 300). The “five husbands” gives rise to numerous interpretations. Often cited is 2 Kings 17, 30-32.41 which gives an account of how Samaria, after the Assyrian invasion, was occupied by five foreign tribes. However, it was said that these five tribes had seven gods. Josephus (Ant. IX, 288) talks of five divinities. Another plausible interpretation sees in the number “five” an allusion to the Pentateuch, the only portion of the Bible that the Samaritans considered as inspired Scripture. There had been an infidelity therefore to the Pentateuch when the woman lived with a sixth man. A similar interpretation can be found in Origen (In Johanneum, XIII, 8). It is difficult to arrive at any certainty in this matter. See M. Lagrange, Évangile selon Saint Jean (Paris: Gabalda, 1925), 109-110; C.K. Barrett, The Gospel According to Saint John (Londres: SPCK, 1978), 235-236.

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ing outcome, for the seventh cannot be like the others; that is, he must be the only true husband. Of course, all of this is purely implicit.\textsuperscript{15}

4. "Where men ought to worship"

The shift from the question about the husband to that of the true place of worship is just as abrupt as that between the conversation about the living water and the conversation about the husband (4,20). Is it possible to supply the missing link? In fact the narrative has already supplied the reader with it, namely Hosea 2. The Samaritan woman with many husbands has many traits in common with the unfaithful spouse in this chapter in Hosea. Moreover, the setting is the same, because the scene takes place in Samaria (4,4). From false husbands to false gods the gap is not difficult to bridge.\textsuperscript{16} It follows from this that the question about the "true" religion and the worship of the "true God" is the same as the question about the "true husband," for the Samaritans as well as for the Jews.\textsuperscript{17}

After this the disciples arrive. "The woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people: 'Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?'" (4,28-29). Why did the woman leave her jar? Didn't she come to draw water from the well? The fact is that her hurried departure corresponds to the schema of the Old Testament narratives mentioned earlier: the future wife runs to her parents' house to announce that she has encountered a man near the well (Gen 24,28; 29,12b; cf. Ex 2,18). Here the Samaritan woman goes to the inhabitants of her village. Hadn't she come to draw water from the well at noon in order to avoid hearing them say what Jesus had just revealed to her, something she now admits without em-


\textsuperscript{16}Remember that "baal" signifies "patron", "master", "husband" in Hebrew. See Fabris, Giovani, 300-301.

\textsuperscript{17}Regarding this point, see de la Poterie, ""Nous adorons, nous, ce que nous connaissons, car le salut vient des Juifs'. Histoire de l'exégèse et interprétation de Jean 4,22," in Bibliothèque 64 (1983) 74-115. The "truth" is a promised gift for the new engagement between God and Israel in Hos 2,20. The link with Jn 4 is therefore supported.

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barrassment? The Samaritan woman has been changed and this attitude of hers is the best proof of the fact.\textsuperscript{18} The people of the city are intrigued by the words of the woman, so they come to see Jesus (4,30).\textsuperscript{19}

5. "The fields are already white for the harvest" (4,35)

While the people are arriving from Sychar, Jesus is having a conversation with his disciples. It is important for the reader to see clearly that these two scenes unfold simultaneously: there are people arriving from the city while Jesus is talking with his disciples. The conversation of Jesus with his disciples is a sort of interlude, which prepares for the last scene (4,39-42). The adverb "meanwhile" of 4,31 and the tense of the verbs are proofs of this.\textsuperscript{20} The problem we have once more is to connect this conversation of Jesus and his disciples about food, sowing and harvest, with what precedes it.

It is true that in the other scenes of meeting near a well the man is invited to a meal (Gen 24,33; Ex 2,20). Perhaps the narrative of Jn 4 uses this theme. But here the Samaritan people offer a meal to Jesus. The theme present in the traditional narrative reappears, but in Jn 4 it is transposed.\textsuperscript{21}

Then the conversation shifts to the harvest. This theme is very rich and it is more than probable that it has a symbolic meaning.\textsuperscript{22} We in-

\textsuperscript{18} Alter, \textit{The Art}, 114-130, talks about the indirect fashion of describing the character of persons in the Bible (Characterization and the Art of Rhetoric).

\textsuperscript{19} See the similar reaction of Andrew in Jn 1,41, when after having met Jesus he goes looking for his brother Peter and says to him: "We have found the Messiah." Philip will do the same with Nathanael (1,45). The Samaritan woman fulfills a function analogous to that of the first disciples. After all, she is said to be a "witness" (4,39).


\textsuperscript{21} On the meaning of the "food," which could be the word of God, the law or wisdom, see Fabris, Giovann, 305; V. Manucci, Giovanni il Vangelo narrante. Introduzione all'arte narrativa del quarto Vangelo (Bologna: Ed. Dehoniane, 1993), 113-116.

tend to show that it is possible to connect it to the entire narrative. Once again, we resort to Hosea 2. At the end of this oracle God announces that he is going to seduce his unfaithful spouse so that she will return to him, and the text describes the fruits of this conversion: God gives her fertility, wheat, new wine, and fresh oil (Hos 2,14-23, spec. 2,22). The country which had been transformed into a desert shall become fertile once again (2,3 and 2,15).

All this is found in the background of the Johannine narrative, but with a particular point to make. Jesus first cites a sort of proverb: “Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? I tell you, lift up your eyes and see how the fields are already white for the harvest” (4,35). In Israel the harvest begins in April-May. The month of April is also called the month of “ears” (‘abib). Four months earlier is the month of December, the height of winter. By this time sowing comes to an end. The normal gap between sowing-time and harvest-time is about four months. By contrast, Jesus is talking of a harvest that is already ripe even if it immediately follows sowing. What harvest is he talking about? It cannot be anything other than the coming to him, while he is talking with his disciples, of the Samaritans in order to find out if he is the Messiah. It is the sequence of the narrative that reveals its significance. The two scenes unfold simultaneously and this is in order to show how the Samaritans coming to Jesus represent the “harvest” of Samaria who re-discovers her true husband and her fertility. The return to the true husband is symbolized by the image of a land which yields an abundant harvest.

At the start the narrative portrays a woman with a tortured life

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23See Brown, John I, 174. An ancient calendar discovered at Gezer and dating to the tenth century B.C. reckons four months between sowing and harvest.

24For Lv 26,5 and Am 8,13 the divine blessing will be some sort of a harvest which immediately follows sowing.

25Brown, John I, 174. For similar structure in the OT, see J-L.Ska, “Our Fathers Have Told Us.” Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives, coll. Subsidia Biblica, 13 (Rome: P.I.B. Press, 1990), 11-12; see particularly 1 Kings 2,12-3,1; 17,1-25; Jdg 4; Ex 14, 8-10. In modern literature, see the famous scene at the fair in Madame Bovary by G. Flaubert.
who, little by little, comes to represent her people and her land. That is why, at this stage, the narrative does not say exactly that the woman has re-discovered her husband. It is the Samaritans who come to look for Jesus and it is they who play the most important role in the end. In fact, they pick up the relay baton from the woman, because now they are playing the role of the future wife in the narratives of the meeting near the well. There is thus an interchange of roles.

The different levels are linked together and superimposed one upon the other, but the main line of the narrative remains sufficiently clear for one who can understand the allusions that are made to the Old Testament texts. The last part of the narrative gives a final confirmation of this.

6. “And he stayed there two days” (4:40)

The conversation between Jesus and his disciples (4:31-38) is followed by a verse of repetition (4:39) which links the last scene of the conversion of the Samaritans (4:39-42) to vv. 29-30, where the woman invites the Samaritans to come to see Jesus because he has told her all that she ever did. After the interlude (4:31-38), the narrative then picks up the main thread of the plot.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of verses 38 and 39 creates a particular confirmation, if that were needed, of the necessary link between

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26See Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium I*, 456,492. Here again, it is inadvisable to set up an opposition between the individual reality of the Samaritan woman and the symbolic meaning of her existence and of her encounter with Jesus. Cf. *Ibid.*, 468. The Samaritan woman is not simply an allegory: “A woman of flesh and of bone, as real as the harvest” (Lagrange, *Jean*, 101); her life is not without meaning. It is in her concrete experience that the evangelist discovers “typical” aspects of the spiritual condition of the Samaritans. Lagrange, *Ibid.* offers an often-cited description of the Samaritan woman; he talks of “her way of advancing a superficial theology to conceal the secret of her heart”; of “the deceptive grace of her manner”; of “her sudden change, because she tramples underfoot her own self-love, when she has yielded to the ascendancy of the man who has revealed her weakness to her”.


28See the repetition of the words “he has told me everything that I ever did” (vv. 29 and 39).
the "harvest" and the "faith" of the Samaritans. Jesus says in fact: "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." (4,38). Immediately after the narrator continues: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me all that I ever did'" (4,39). The juxtaposition of the phrases undeniably suggests the bringing together of the symbolic language of the harvest and the realities it signifies, that is to say the conversion and the faith of the Samaritans.  

Afterwards, as in the other narratives of a meeting near a well, Jesus is invited to stay in the house of his hosts. In this way we return to the traditional schema. This narrative is different, in that it lacks the last element, that of the marriage. Instead the narrative concludes with a profession of faith: "We know that he is indeed the savior of the world" (4,42).

The time has come to gather together the lessons of the narrative and answer the question we asked at the start: why is there no marriage? The answer is indeed simple.

On the one hand, Jn 4 uses the structure of an encounter of future spouses near a well. On the other hand, the narrative repeatedly draws on Hosea 2, the story of an unfaithful wife. Where do we situate the Samaritan woman? With the unfaithful wife, of course. All the other encounters near the well portray unmarried young women. Gen 24 explicitly mentions this: "The maiden was very fair to look upon, a virgin whom no man had known." (v.16). In other words, Rebekah is the ideal candidate to become Isaac's wife. We find the Samaritan woman in a very different situation. The problem for her is certainly not to find a husband, but rather to put order into her life. She must find her one true husband, just as Samaria ought to find or re-discover her one true God. Is not the final act of faith a logical and appropriate conclu-

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29For Lenglet, Jn 4,4-42, 500-501, the Samaritan woman is one of the "sowers" of this word of which she is a "witness" (4,39). The harvest ripens just after the time of sowing.

30See Gen 24,23-24.31-32; 29,14; Ex 2,21.
sion to the narrative? If the encounter started with an unusual circumstance — at noon and unknown to anyone — it was for the same reason. It was not about the search for a spouse near the well, something done in the evening. Rather it was about the “speaking from the heart” of the unfaithful wife to bring back her one true husband (cf. Hos 2,14). In this case, we cannot have a marriage where there has already been one for a long time between God and his Samaritan people. Jesus comes to restore this marriage, this broken alliance, and the Samaritans are the first ones to reveal the unsuspected depths of this salvation which now extends to the whole universe. (4,42; Cf. 4,21-26).

Finally, one last question: is it God or is it Jesus who is the husband? Is Jesus the bridegroom mentioned in 3,29? Or is role limited to that of a servant who goes searching for a wife for his master, like Abraham’s servant in Gen 24? This is difficult to answer. The narrative seems to be deliberately vague regarding this point, undoubtedly in order to suggest the very close relationship, which, in the gospel of John, unites God and Jesus, the Father and the Son.

CONCLUSION

We have not tried to plumb the depths of Johannine theology in this passage.\(^3\)\(^1\) We only wanted to show that certain difficulties in the narrative could be easily resolved by recourse to some texts of the Old Testament, especially to the scenes of meeting near a well (Gen 24; 29,1-14; Ex 2,14-22) and the oracle in Hosea 2,2-23. It is possible to understand John 4 without these references. But the text is so loaded that Jn 4 can be reread very well in the light of these pages, which certainly were part of the “collective memory” of the readers of the Johannine gospel. We are convinced that it is true also for other pages


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