

## Women and Wells

### John 4

Locations come loaded with meanings. When we tell stories, the location of the action communicates to us what we should expect to happen. Today, if you're watching a horror movie and someone says "Let's go to the basement" everyone knows what is about to happen. And although type of story that we are considering may change our views of those locations, we *still* tend to associate locations with concepts, ideas, and situations. The same is true in antiquity and also in the Bible. Places like mountains or wildernesses signal certain things; so do locations like cities or fields; and even specific settings like threshing floors or wells often indicated that certain events were about to take place. Since we're talking about John 4 and the Samaritan Woman that Jesus meets at Jacob's Well today for Bible class, I wanted us to consider *wells* for just a bit.

There are a *number* of "Woman at the Well" passages in the Bible. Abraham's servant meets Rebekah at a well in Paddan Aram (Gen 24.1–44), Jacob meets Rachel very near the same spot (Gen 29.1–30), and Moses meets Zipporah at a well in Midian (Exd 2.11–22). These are different people at different spots and different times, but all of these historical episodes plays out *similarly*. I don't think this is an accident. Instead, I think that God's inspired writers—guided by the Holy Spirit—want us to see the similarities and pay attention to them, so that we can use the Bible to interpret the Bible.

Genesis 24 opens this part of Abraham's life by telling us that he is old (24.1) and that his son Isaac needs a wife (24.2–9). Abraham is too old to make a long journey, so he sends a trusted slave all the way back to Paddan Aram to find a wife who isn't a Canaanite. This slave stops and prays that God guide his hand so that he will be faithful to his master, providing a test—whoever God chooses should offer to provide hospitality in the form of water for himself and camels from the local well (24.10–14). "Before he finished praying," that very thing happens (24.15–28). As the rest of the story unfolds, we find out that this "random" hospitable girl is a cousin of Abraham's and that God's providence has guided the entire thing. As she joins in God's provides and has faith in his future, Rebekah becomes an "Abraham Figure" herself—willing to leave her father and mother, her house and her home, because she trusts in the promise of God and goes to marry Isaac (24.29–44). We could spend more time on this story, but let's move on.

The situation in Genesis 29 looks familiar! Just as Abraham had lived as an exile from his family in Canaan, Jacob is now exiled from his family in Canaan (29.1) and needs to find a new home and family of his own (29.2–8). He too has previously prayed that God would lead him and protect him (Gen 28.10–22), and now—like Abraham's slave the generation earlier—meets women coming to the well, one of whom "just so happens" to be his relative and future wife (29.9–12). Like Rebekah, Rachel runs home, reports the news, and Jacob is added to the family (29.13–20). Let's look at one more episode.

As we move from Paddan Aram to the Wilderness of Midian, the rest of the situation looks quite similar to Genesis 29. Moses was forced into exile after a conflict with his brother (Exd 2.11–15). He flees home and ends up far away at a well, where he sees women coming to water the flocks (2.16–18). After this encounter, one of the women returns home and tells her father about what happened; her father invites the exile to come and make a new home with them; and Zipporah becomes Moses' wife (2.18–22).

Each of these stories has its own unique elements, but they also share a *lot* of similarities: the main male characters is an exile from their family and homeland (Abraham, Jacob, and Moses); they travel to a well in order to gain a new home or community; and there—guided by God's providence—they gain a wife that carries on God's providential care for God's people (Rebekah, Rachel, Zipporah). There are "practical" reasons this happens (wells *were* the hot spot to meet folks in the ancient world!), but it is far more important that we recognize that God was caring for his people and providing what everyone needed. God provided

wives to carry on their family lines; he provided homes to those who were in exile; he provided opportunities to these women to be grafted into Israel's salvation.

He's going to do the same thing for the Samaritan woman, but he's going to do it in dramatically different ways. And if we pay attention to how God's inspired Word has told the previous stories, we can be in a better position to appreciate how surprising what he does at Jacob's Well really was.