"Give Us This Day Our Daily *Water"* *(John 4:3–42)*



Jesus taught us to pray "Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11), but well might He have said "Give us today our daily water."[1]

Israel, like Australia, is a hot and dry country, so it was perfectly natural for a weary traveller on a hot and dusty day to rest beside a well. It was around midday when a Samaritan woman carrying a water jar approached the well where Jesus was sitting by Himself.[2]

Immediately on her arrival Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink" (v7, NRSV). She recognised that He was a Jew journeying on foot from Jerusalem. His request, therefore, shocked her: "How is it that you who are a Jew ask of me for a drink, since I am a Samaritan woman (v9a)?" To reinforce the point, John reminds the reader that Jews did not associate or have dealings with Samaritans (v9b).

The hatred was due to both groups claiming to be the true people of God, and they condemned each other as apostates. The Samaritans claimed that their Bible (the Pentateuch), their city (Shechem), their temple, their priesthood and their holy mountain (Mt Gerizim) provided the true approach to God, and not Jerusalem, Mt Zion, the Jewish temple or the Levitical priesthood. Obviously, for a lone, weary Jew to sit at midday beside Jacob's well in the centre of Samaritan territory was highly risky behaviour.

Consequently, when Jews travelled from Judea to Galilee they often avoided Samaria by crossing the Jordan River and reaching their destination via Perea. Since there was this alternate route, Jesus had no physical necessity to pass

through Samaria on His way back to Galilee (v3). Yet John states that Jesus *had* to pass through Samaria (v4). The compulsion came from an inner conviction that this was the Father's will. Divine necessity rather than personal safety directed Jesus' choice of route.

"If you knew"—Jesus said in response to the Samaritan woman's surprised reaction to His request for a drink of water—"the gift of God and who it was who said to you, 'Give me a drink, 'you would have asked him and he would have given you living water" (v10).

What is "the gift of God" of which the woman is ignorant? Jesus is the Gift of God and through Him are gifts of the Holy Spirit and eternal life (vv14c, 36).

John makes reference to "eternal life" more frequently than any other NT writer. The woman naturally relates Jesus' reference to "living water" to the only water at hand—the water at the bottom of Jacob's well. But, in the woman's view, Jesus had some insurmountable problems. "Sir," she said, "you don't have a bucket, and the well is deep.[3] From where are you getting the living water (v11)?"

She then continues to query Jesus' credentials with scepticism, "You aren't greater than our father Jacob who gave us the well and from which he, his sons, and herds drank, are you?" (v12). The question expects a negative answer for in her opinion it was obvious that He was not greater than the patriarch Jacob—a figure whom she pointedly claims for her own people ("our father Jacob", "gave to us"). Of course, Jesus is indeed greater than the venerated patriarch Jacob.

Jesus attempted to change her literal thinking (vv11,12) by clarifying the difference between the living water He was offering and the water at the bottom of the well. The well water only temporarily quenched a person's thirst (v13), but the water which Jesus gave produced a perpetual spring (v14) within a person's being, springing up unto eternal life. To her literal mind, if she never thirsted again then she would never have to come to draw water, so, "Yes please," she exclaimed, "give me this miraculous water" (v15).

In an attempt to shift the woman's focus to spiritual things, Jesus turned the conversation to her personal situation. Jesus invited the woman to go and fetch her husband and bring him back to the well (v16). This was not possible, she said, since she was without a husband. Jesus accepted this as a candid admission, given that she had had five husbands and was currently living in a de facto relationship. So yes, at the literal level where she operated, she was indeed without a husband (vv17,18).[4]

The woman was dumbfounded that this Jew—a stranger passing through her land—knew the details of her private life. The only way she could explain Jesus' familiarity with her marital history was that He had some special affinity with God.

"I perceive sir," she said, "that you are a prophet" (v19).

The woman was convinced that prophets should be able to solve debated theological issues, and here she was in the presence of one. She confronts Jesus with the major theological dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans: "Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you [Jews] say that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (v20). "Please prophet, who is right? Which is the true holy mountain, Gerizim or Zion?"

Jesus at first seems to endorse the Jewish claim that Jerusalem was the right place of worship (v22), but in the end His answer is radical.

"The hour is approaching when the whole idea of sacred cities, holy hills, or hallowed ground is irrelevant. Indeed, the hour has arrived for believers to worship the Father in Spirit and Truth. These are the kind of worshippers that the Father seeks, not those who squabble over mountains and cities (vv21, 23). God Himself is not material but Spirit, so His true worshippers must do so in a mode that reflects the nature of His being, that is, Spirit and Truth (v24)."

> CLEARLY JESUS' ANSWER REPLACES THE ISSUE OF FINDING THE RIGHT HOLY PLACE WITH A FORM OF WORSHIP THAT IS MORE CONCERNED WITH THE "WHOM" THAN WITH THE "WHERE".

The contrast made between the question ("this mountain or Jerusalem?") and the answer ("neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem") directs our understanding. Clearly Jesus' answer replaces the issue of finding the right holy place with a form of worship that is more concerned with "the whom" than with "the where".

Jesus' response relates to corporate worship rather than personal piety (you, we, these, those).

The woman felt Jesus "the prophet" had spoken in riddles and had not addressed her question.

"I know," she said, "that Messiah, who is called the Christ, is coming, and that when he comes, he will announce to us everything" (v25).

In other words, her question will be settled when the Messiah finally arrives. Thus, she dismisses Jesus' exposition as providing no solution; the question concerning which mountain remains pressing for her.



Jesus states that He is the Messiah she awaited. "I am he" (*egō eimi*), Jesus declared, "the man who is speaking to you" (v26).

Jesus confesses His messianic identity unequivocally to the Samaritan woman, but it was not easy for her to accept His claim. The Samaritan hoped-for *Taheb* was not a messianic figure in the royal line of David, but a restorer in the image of the promised prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15).

She would have heard Jesus' claim to His identity in these terms; but whatever the differences in the nature of the hoped-for-Messiah (*Taheb*) in the two traditions, it is certain that the Samaritans did not expect Him to be a hated Jew. The woman's initial recognition of Jesus as a Jew now stands as a barrier to her believing in Him as the Messiah. Leaving her water jar behind, she returned to her village.

The Samaritan woman announces to her fellow citizens only the fact that Jesus was cognisant of her marital affairs. She makes no reference to His being a Jew (she simply calls Him "a man"), or to His claim of being able to provide living water, or to His profession of being the Messiah. No wonder really, since a Jewish Taheb would be an impossibility for the Samaritans.

Consequently she indicates some hesitancy in asking her fellow Samaritans whether Jesus is the Messiah ("This man is not perhaps the Messiah, is he [v29b]?"), for she expects them to dismiss the suggestion.

A multitude in that township believed in Jesus on the basis of the woman's brief testimony (v39a), which was a limited statement about Jesus' prescience—"He told me everything that I have ever done" (v39b NRSV). Even so, that was a sufficient trigger for an abundant harvest.

It is the Samaritan woman who did the agricultural labour (v38; 4:6) and not the disciples; they just reaped what they had not sown (v38).

The Samaritans went out to Jesus and invited Him to stay with them, and He accepted their offer of hospitality. He remained with them for two days. The result was that many more Samaritans believed because of Jesus' message (v41). They told the woman that they no longer believed on the basis of her testimony alone, but because they themselves had heard Him and knew that He was truly the "Saviour of the world" (v42, see John 3:17; 12:47).

The reaping had begun in earnest. The Samaritan woman began the labour in fields that were ripe for harvesting while the disciples stood by puzzling over the source of Jesus' food.

The title "Saviour of the world" was one of the titles for the Roman emperor, so the application of it to Jesus was daring.[5] The surprises are many: a Jew, the world's Saviour?! Samaritans, the first to confess it! A woman, the major witness to it! The disciples, mere bystanders!

So what does it mean to worship God in Spirit and Truth? True worship is to worship God in Christ in whom the Father has made Himself known (1:18). True worship in Christ knows no privileged people; there is no Jew or Samaritan. True worship in Christ has no place for gender inequality. True worship in Christ has no Mecca and no Jerusalem, no Constantinople and no Rome. True worship in Christ invites anyone to worship God anywhere.

The presence of God is not confined to buildings made with hands, and although I abhor poor church architecture, I know that God is as much present in a tin shed as He is in the beautiful masonry of a King's College chapel. True worship in Christ cannot be confined to any single institutional structure. The Spirit is free like the wind (3:8).

1. Translations are the author's unless stated otherwise.
2. Her coming to the well alone at midday should not be construed to mean she had been ostracised by the other women. Women did come to wells alone at various times of the day (Genesis 24:11–16; 29:7–9; Exodus 2:16–19).
3. It was more than 100 feet (30 metres) deep.
4. Her marital history may have an innocent explanation: the woman shows no shame, the villagers show no hostility and Jesus shows no scorn.
5. Craig R Koester, "'The Savior of the World' (John 4:42)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990) 665–80.

DR NORM YOUNG
FORMER SENIOR LECTURER, AVONDALE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE.