

The faith of Elijah and the widow woman had been tested to the extreme. Many widows would have lost children during this period of hunger and starvation (Lk. 4:25), but God's grace rested upon this particular woman. She was carefully selected for His purpose. Though she was a Gentile, God knew that her heart would be converted and that she would finally respond in faith.

Let us not forget that this lowly widow demonstrated considerable faith, not just at this moment of victory over death, but throughout her time with Elijah. As the writer to the Hebrews testified: "Women received their dead raised to life again" (Heb. 11:35). Could this be describing the faith of this widow, a woman who subsequently "obtained a good report" (v. 2) and who now has the firm assurance of inhabiting a heavenly city (v. 16)?

Why was such an acute test required by God to prove His faithful servants? Surely it was so

that they both might learn to know God and ultimately be transformed into His image (Col. 3:10). The trying of Elijah's faith wrought patience (Jas. 1:3) and resulted in the widow's conversion, or at the very least in the confirmation of her faith and in the glory and praise of God. And it was at Zarephath, the 'place of refining',² within this crucible, that God Himself sat "as a refiner and purifier of silver" (Mal. 3:3) and truly purged them.

Why was this necessary? In order that He could make up His precious collection of glistening jewels (v. 17). For both of these individuals shine forth as fine examples of faith, a faith "much more precious than of gold that perisheth" (1 Pet. 1:7).

(To be continued)

2. See Sept. 2004, p. 353.

Another look at the woman at the well

Alan Fowler

THE WOMAN at the well of Sychar is a fascinating character, but not infrequently she is loaded with a burden of guilt that tends to overshadow her admirable qualities. It has been said that Jesus "exposed her sordid background" and that, as Dean Alford expressed it, "This woman had been vainly seeking solace at the broken cisterns of carnal lust".

What is overlooked is that she is not condemned by the Gospel writer, nor by Jesus, nor by her compatriots, nor by her own conscience after she had recognised Jesus as the Messiah. So what is the truth regarding her character, the disclosure that she had had five husbands and that she was living with a man who was not her husband? We believe the answer may be found in Samaritan beliefs and customs.

Samaritan beliefs

As soon as the Samaritan woman realised that Jesus was a prophet she confronted him with the issue that separated Jews from Samaritans, namely, the site of the temple. The Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch as the only inspired writings and they rejected the rest of the Jewish Scriptures. The Samaritan Pentateuch contained

an addition to the tenth commandment in Exodus 20:17 which decreed that the temple was to be built on Mount Gerizim, the mount of blessings (Deut. 11:29). To support this addition, the Samaritan version of Deuteronomy 27:4 changed Ebal, the mount of cursings, to Gerizim, and added Gerizim in connection with Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18) and with the offering of Isaac (22:2).

Apart from these geographical changes, the laws in the Samaritan Pentateuch are substantially the same as in the Jewish (Massoretic) Pentateuch, and the Samaritans observed the laws of Moses with the same attention to detail as the Jews, possibly more so, as a second-century Jewish patriarch, Simon ben Gamaliel, declared: "Every command the Samaritans keep, they are more scrupulous in observing than Israel". It is relevant to our enquiry that the Samaritans were particularly scrupulous about the laws of defilement and the purifications required, which used large amounts of water.

In spite of sharing a common set of laws, the Jews and Samaritans in New Testament times had become totally separated. The Samaritans were demonised by Jews (Jno. 8:48). Samaritan women were regarded as being ritually unclean

at all times. Orthodox Jews travelling between Judea and Galilee preferred to make a detour east of Jordan to avoid any contact with Samaritans.

Five husbands

Our enquiry focuses on what this woman's private life tells us about her character. The fact that she could carry a heavy water pot means that she was not an old woman, so how had she survived five husbands? The Greek word for husbands here is *aner*, which means 'man', but when used in connection with a woman it means husband. So, unless Jesus was being ironic when he referred to her five husbands (4:18), we must accept that they were not five lovers. Irony is unlikely because Jesus continues, ". . . and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband". "Husband" here must be literal.

Assuming that she had had five genuine husbands, we now need to explain the succession of five. There are four possibilities:

- 1 they had predeceased her;
- 2 she had divorced them;
- 3 she had been divorced by them;
- 4 a combination of these.

We will examine these possibilities, recognising that no firm conclusion can be expected:

- 1 It is extremely unlikely that a woman would outlive so many husbands.
- 2 We have no direct evidence regarding Samaritan divorce laws in the first century, but they would certainly have followed the Mosaic code, which made no provision for a wife to divorce her husband. However, there is a possibility that by New Testament times the Samaritans had, like the Jews, made it possible for a wife to sue for divorce on the grounds of persistent cruelty. (This probably explains Mark 10:12.) But, even so, she could not sue directly; she had to convince a court, which might then force the husband to grant a divorce. Once again, it is extremely unlikely that a woman would encounter a succession of cruel husbands, or that she would be able to persuade the court five times that her claims were genuine.
- 3 Under the Mosaic laws a man could obtain a divorce on the grounds of some uncleanness in his wife, as laid down in Deuteronomy 24:1: "When a man hath taken a wife, and married [Heb. come in to] her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness [Heb.

nakedness of a matter] in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house".

Although the uncleanness is not specified, it is clear that it relates to sexual intercourse. Since premarital unchastity is dealt with Deuteronomy 22 and was a capital offence, the uncleanness in Deuteronomy 24 is of a different kind and there is no blame attached to the condition. Not surprisingly, there was much speculation and argument among rabbis over the nature of the uncleanness that allowed a man to reject his wife.

By New Testament times two schools of thought had been established; the school of Shammai taught that the uncleanness only meant premarital unchastity, whereas the school of Hillel argued that it related to any defect which her husband found offensive. Not surprisingly, the school of Hillel prevailed, and divorce became possible on the flimsiest of pretexts, "every cause" (Mt. 19:3), and the issuing of divorce papers (*gets*) was a big earner for the lawyers. Since the Samaritans were careful observers of the law and rejected Jewish devices for circumventing the law, such as Corban, it is likely that they would have interpreted "uncleanness" in its obvious sense as relating only to intimate female problems.

We are therefore justified in seeking possible intimate causes for the woman at the well's repeated rejection. This could be due to some physical genital problem, but it is far more likely that her problem was related to ritual uncleanness resulting from frequent or prolonged menstrual periods. This ritual uncleanness is dealt with in Leviticus 15:19-31, which states that a menstruating woman remains unclean until seven days after the end of the period. This law, called *nidda*, was designed to ensure maximum fertility; but if a woman has frequent periods, for example every two weeks, she becomes unclean for most of the time, a condition which would put a severe strain on her marriage.

This problem is highlighted in the case of the woman in Luke 8:43, who had "an issue of blood". She was desperate for relief and believed that she could be cured by touching Jesus's garment. But her problem was that, if discovered, Jesus would become ritually unclean (Lev. 15:19). This explains why she was so frightened when Jesus asked who had

touched him. Even to this day, rabbis have reserved seats on public transport to avoid sitting where an unclean woman has sat.

- 4 Although we accept that the woman at the well may have lost five husbands for more than one of these reasons, the important point is that for none of these reasons is there justification for accusing her of being promiscuous or being a harlot. We are not told why she was not married to her sixth partner. Perhaps it was to avoid being further humiliated by another divorce. But if that were the case, why did she not remain unattached? The explanation may lie in the fact that, unless she had a supportive family, being a widow in New Testament times meant destitution. We do not know her circumstances, so although her cohabitation was sinful, we are not in a position to condemn her.

A misjudged woman

If our assessment is correct, then we should expect to find that the narrative as a whole would support our suggestion. We believe it does, and that the character of this woman has often been misjudged. Commentators tend to assume her deep guilt and then interpret her words and actions in the light of their prejudice.

A typical example of this is found in David Smith's classic, *The Days of his Flesh*, in which he writes: "The woman was one of the outcasts of society, and it needed not the eye of Jesus to read her character. It was written upon her face and advertised by her bearing". Having assumed her pariah status, he then comments on her response to Jesus's request for a drink in these words: "She answered, after the manner of her sort, impudently, and not without surprise. 'How', she sneered, 'dost thou, though thou be a Jew, ask drink of me, though I be a woman, a Samaritan woman?'" (p. 75).

If, however, we look at her question without prejudice, and with regard to the social and religious customs of the day, we may come to a very different conclusion. Her astonishment at Jesus's request was altogether predictable. Not only did Jews have no dealings with Samaritans, it was improper for a Jewish rabbi to speak to a woman on her own in a public place, even if she were his wife. Furthermore, since Samaritan women were regarded by Jews as permanently menstruous, Jesus would have become ritually unclean if he had drunk out of a vessel she had handled. No wonder she questioned the propri-

ety of Jesus's request. Her challenge was sending the message, "Do you really want to drink from my vessel and make yourself unclean?"

But her perplexity was only increased when Jesus now told her that if she had asked him for a drink, he would have given her living water (Jno. 4:10).¹ Not surprisingly, she failed to understand the symbolic language, just as, shortly afterwards, the disciples would fail to understand the metaphor when Jesus said that he had had food to eat. So she asked Jesus how he could draw water without a vessel. She then asked if he were greater than Jacob, who, according to tradition, had dug the well.

Jesus now compounded her difficulty by continuing to speak metaphorically, saying that those who drank of his living water would never thirst because it would be in them "a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (v. 14). Still she did not understand, but this was not wilful, because, as a Samaritan, she would only have known the Pentateuch and would not have been familiar with the metaphor of 'water' and 'living water' so frequently used in the prophets (Isa. 12:3; 44:3; Jer. 2:13; Zech. 13:1; 14:8). Her reply was, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw" (Jno. 4:15, RSV).

In seeking to understand this response we again need to guard against prejudice. In the original Greek, 'Sir' (*kurios*) was a term of respect applied to someone in authority. According to David Smith, she was mocking Jesus with "feigned reverence". But since we do not know the tone of her voice we cannot be sure whether she was speaking literally or ironically. However, the fact that Jesus continued the dialogue suggests that she was not being ironic and was genuinely seeking the truth.

Having tested her sincerity, Jesus now moved the discussion on by dropping a bombshell: "call your husband" (v. 16, RSV). By revealing his knowledge of her life Jesus showed her that he was a prophet, so she then seized the opportunity to engage Jesus in a discussion on the true site of the temple. Her detractors argue that, as a woman, she would not be interested in religious matters, and that she was only concerned with removing the spotlight from her private life. We

1. "Living water" is spring water as distinct from stored (cistern) water. Jacob's well provided living water because it was fed from an underground spring. Thus 'well' in verses 6 and 14 both translate *pēgē*, meaning 'fountain' or 'spring', in the original Greek.

cannot be certain of her motives, but we do know that Jesus accepted that she had a genuine interest in spiritual matters because he then engaged her in a discussion on the nature of true worship and accorded her a rare privilege by revealing that he was the Messiah.

An evangelist

Excited by this revelation, the woman left her waterpot, returned to the city and spoke to the men: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (v. 30, RSV). It has been suggested that she spoke to the men because the women would have despised her as a whore. But surely the simple explanation is that the men, who sat at the gate of the city, would be the first people she would encounter. Moreover, if her past was so shameful, why did she mention it?

John tells us that many of the Samaritans believed because of her testimony, and that many more believed after Jesus had preached to them. The AV translation of verse 42, "Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves", appears to belittle her

achievement, but the correct translation is, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves" (RSV). Whilst we are not prepared to follow the Greek Orthodox Church in canonising her (as 'St. Photina'), we commend her for her work as an evangelist. Yes, she was a sinner, but there is no record that Jesus condemned her. The narrative concentrates on her conversion, and that is what should engage our attention.

Conclusion

None of our suggestions regarding the woman at the well has been proved. But our study has shown how easily prejudice can affect our opinion. If we begin with the assumption that Jesus's reference to five husbands was ironic then we can fit the narrative into that mould. On the other hand, if, as seems likely, Jesus was referring to five literal husbands, then the narrative fits into an entirely different mould. So an important lesson from this beautiful story is the fallibility of human judgement. As jurors we may express our verdict on this woman, but to pass judgement is God's prerogative.

Metals in the Bible

4. Gold (Part 2)

Peter Hemingray

IN THIS ARTICLE we complete our two-part look at gold in the Bible by considering the art of the goldsmith and the symbolic use of gold in Scripture, including its appearance in the image which Nebuchadnezzar saw and the golden lampstand of the tabernacle.

The goldsmith's art

Gold's main use was for decoration, for example for jewellery and for the items of worship in the tabernacle and temple. Thus for the tabernacle Bezaleel "made two cherubims of gold, beaten out of one piece made he them, on the two ends of the mercy seat . . . And he made the candlestick of pure gold . . . all of it was one beaten work of pure gold" (Ex. 37:7,17,22). Beaten work was only one of the forms of work carried out by a goldsmith in ancient times; other forms were soldering (the joining of pieces of gold with a gold alloy of lower melting point) and casting. The fame of the ancient Hebrew artisans is car-

ried down to this day, for their names are recorded: Bezaleel the son of Uri (Ex. 31:2), Uzziel the son of Harhaiah (Neh. 3:8) and Malchiah the goldsmith's son (v. 31).

The Egyptians knew two methods of bonding metals: welding and soldering. As early as the Middle Kingdom little pieces of jewellery were welded together. The part which had to be added had a melting point slightly below that of the main part; it was heated until it became malleable and could be affixed. Then the whole artefact was heated over a ceramic furnace. A blowpipe with a clay nozzle was used to increase the heat. Because of the fact that the tongs (see the smith in the top left corner of Figure 1 opposite) were made of bronze, with a melting point of 1030°C, below that of gold (1063°C) and barely above that of silver (950°C), quite a bit of dexterity was required of the artisan. Fast action was needed, before the tool heated up too much.