

a) *How is an understanding of the person and teaching of Jesus assisted by His conversations with:*

i) **The Samaritan Woman**

Women feature prominently in John's Gospel, and Jesus seems to have included a group of women amongst his regular followers and supporters. His attitude to, and inclusion of, women is sharply contrasted with the traditional views of his culture. It places them at key events, signs and preaching activities, anticipating a key place for them in the early church. In the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus asks her to give him a drink and the woman is rather surprised as it was common knowledge Jews and Samaritans did not share vessels or eat together. Jesus provoked surprise among his disciples "They marveled that he was talking to a woman" (v.27)

There is then a conversation in which Jesus begins to talk about living water which he can provide. There is an unusual combination here – man and woman, Jew and Samaritan, a double prejudice. We understand that the Jews considered themselves God's Chosen people and due to the Samaritans mixed race they were considered worse than the gentiles. In addition, Jesus made it clear that although "It is from Jews that salvation comes" (v.23), God would in the future be worshipped from different places and the emphasis was to be on spirit and truth.

Jesus drank from the Samaritan woman's cup, which she had drawn from Jacob's well. Jews saw the Torah as like water. Jesus had superseded Judaism and created living water which is the Gospel giving eternal life. Jesus declares he was the Messiah "I am he who is speaking to you now" (v.26). The woman was a witness and **Smalley** adds that Jesus' need for a drink shows his humanity first and then later his divinity is revealed. It has also been suggested that the act of Jesus actually drinking and revealing his Messiahship on the same occasion was to refute Gnostic claims that separated the man and God into different beings.

His conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-30) shows his willingness to dismiss conventions of men which stand in opposition to his purposes. Normally a Jew would not address a Samaritan and normally a man would not speak to a woman in public. However, the Lord's conversation with this woman shows how he disregards these conventions of society in order to communicate about himself and the Kingdom. The Samaritan woman emerges in this conversation as a perceptive and articulate individual, fully capable of engaging in theologically profound discourse. Certainly, if Jesus had considered this woman to be inferior and unable to speak of spiritual matters, he would not have spoken to her in concepts assuming prior knowledge (e.g. the concept of "living water," John 4:10). Nor would he have responded to her question about the place of worship (4:21). Her sex did not affect

the manner of his approach to her. Jesus shows he is a wise teacher who challenges and provokes, but neither shames the woman for her past nor ridicules her for requiring time to come to her own understanding of who he is. He addresses her past in order that an honest relationship might develop, removing it as a possible source of shame that might prevent her from moving toward him.

It is instructive to note that this woman is the first individual to whom Jesus, in the Johannine account, clearly reveals that he is the Messiah. She is also the first messenger of that revelation outside the circle of disciples (v. 29). The witness role of the Samaritan woman is emphasized by John. He says that the villagers "believed ... because of the woman's word." (John 4:39)

ii) The woman taken in adultery

"The status of women was markedly inferior to that of men throughout the ancient world including Judaism." G. Stanton. The emphasis on this story is on forgiveness and Jesus' attitude to those who have sinned. Jesus demonstrates compassion and wisdom.

▲ woman who was probably guilty of sexual activity before marriage was brought before Jesus by the Jewish authorities who hoped to trap him into breaking the Law. Jesus however is aware of the trap and neatly avoids it with the words: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw the first stone at her" (8:7). If Jesus deferred to the Romans, he discredited himself as a Teacher of the Law. If he condoned the stoning, the Romans would consider him an insurrectionist and put him to death. Either way, they thought, he couldn't win. He would either lose his credibility or his life. Either way, he would be silenced. What the men of the town were doing was contradictory to Old Testament law. She had received no trial, had not appeared in front of her elders, they had simply dragged her from bed and were going to stone her. The woman is saved although the Law is not wrong but it should not be imposed in such a strict, uncaring way. We do not know if the woman becomes a disciple, as there is more focus on Jesus' relationship with the authorities and the law. However, we know that women were often made to bare more of the responsibility and guilt of sexual misconduct rather than their male partners, and it is notable that in this story there is accordingly no sign of her sexual partner. In saving the woman's life, was Jesus acting for a greater equality of women?

▲ Although this woman stood for the opposite of everything Jesus taught, even though she was living in a terrible and degrading sin, Jesus openly expressed tenderness and compassion and forgiveness to her. The Son of God didn't discipline her, instead, he lovingly told her to leave her life of sin. He gave her a second chance. The conversation between Jesus and the adulterous woman also shows

how Jesus does not simply ignore sin or overlook it. Jesus chose not to condemn the woman, but he did not tell her that her sin was unimportant or not actually a sin. The act of forgiving includes an acknowledgement that the act was indeed sinful, and he expects her to stop committing that sin.

He showed her grace and represented his attitude as a teacher. He was trying to demonstrate the difference between law and grace. None of us are "without sin," therefore all of us are in need of God's grace to escape God's perfect and holy judgment. It's not that he condoned adultery; it is just that it is not the unpardonable sin. Rejecting the grace of Jesus to forgive sin is the only unforgivable sin.

So in conclusion, Jesus teaches us that salvation is possible for all sinners but "they must sin NO more" (v.11). Also we must confront ourselves and others to bring an end to sin and Jesus' compassion for the worst of humanity shows His tenderness of heart.

b) To what extent does knowledge of the social and religious views of first century Palestine contribute to an understanding of these conversations?

During the first century, the religion of the Samaritans was similar to that of the Jews, except that they were more liberal—more kindred spirits of the Sadducees, for example, than the Pharisees. Religiously, though, they were considered as foreigners. In reference to the Samaritan woman **William Barclay** even tells of a segment of the Pharisees known as the "bleeding and bruised" Pharisees; when they saw a woman approaching, they would close their eyes, hence, were running into things constantly, and yet Jesus addressed this woman: "Give me water to drink." The Son of God, therefore, in one fell swoop, broke through two barriers—the one steeped in racial bigotry, the other a hurtful disposition that distanced the man from one of the sweetest treasures of God's creations.