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# Woman at the Well

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### Woman at the Well

by James F. McGrath

**Q.** When Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman in [John 4:17-19](#), is the passage about her husbands literal, or symbolic of the five different tribes that were settled in her town?

**A.** The Samaritan woman, unlike other individuals who speak with Jesus in the [Gospel of John](#), is never named. Some interpreters have taken this anonymity as an invitation to view her as an abstraction, a symbol of Samaria itself. If she is a symbol, the thinking goes, then surely her five husbands could represent the five locations in Samaria that settlers are supposed to have been brought according to [2Kings 17:24](#). This approach treats the Samaritan woman as a mere [allegory](#).

This view gains traction when we look at the heavy symbolism in the story. Readers of the Jewish (or, for that matter, the Samaritan) scriptures would know that when a man and a woman meet at a well, a wedding usually follows. And this well is not just any well; it is the same well where Jacob met his first wife Rachel in [Gen 29](#). In [John 4](#), the Samaritan woman asks whether Jesus is greater than Jacob, an obvious wink to the earlier story. To make the allusion even more explicit, [John 4:6](#) says the encounter occurs at midday, just as did Jacob's first encounter with Rachel ([Gen 29:7](#)).

This allegorical and symbolic interpretation of the Samaritan woman has taken hold; yet it denigrates her in a way not consistent with the biblical text, and reflects a lack of sensitivity to the story's historical context.

We are told that the woman has previously had five husbands, and that the man whom she now has is not her husband. Unless Samaritan law was very different from Jewish law, and their culture likewise radically different, there is no possibility that this meant that the woman had divorced five men. Women could not initiate divorce in [Judaism](#), and in this patriarchal cultural context, a woman who divorced a couple of husbands would not be likely to be taken as the wife of yet another. Are we to imagine either that several husbands have divorced the woman, or more plausibly, that the woman has been widowed multiple times?

Several stories do feature women who were widowed more than once and would have been known in the original hearers' context. [Gen 38](#) narrates the practice of levirate marriage—the responsibility of a man to marry his (childless) brother's widow ([Deut 25:5-10](#)). An even closer parallel to [John 4](#) is in the Book of Tobit ([Tobit 3:8](#)), where a woman named Sara loses seven husbands to a demon on each wedding night. The story suggests that a serial widow may struggle to remarry—a man might fear that some curse or demon was associated with her, and that his own life would be at risk if they wed. Such beliefs would of course leave the woman in a more vulnerable position, though she might still become a concubine.

It must be pointed out as well that neither divorce, remarriage, nor concubinage were considered immoral in this time period, and so the widespread slandering of the Samaritan woman from the story, so popular in sermons, is inappropriate.

The story of the Samaritan woman is indeed symbolic: Jesus is the bridegroom (an image used in [John 3](#)), the one who is greater than Jacob, who will gather a people to worship and transcend the distinctions that have kept Jews and Samaritans at odds for centuries. But the Samaritan woman is a serious character in her own right. Tragically, she has lost multiple husbands. Into that setting, Jesus comes like a new Jacob, not to marry her, but to unite Jacob's descendants in a way that Jacob could not. This woman's role in mediating her community's encounter with Jesus helps elevate her status, so that she becomes known as a spiritual leader, rather than as a woman who had five husbands.

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