j:s148 24-5-1999 p:2 c:0

New Test. Stud. vol. 45pp. , 1999, 148–152
Printed in the United Kingdom
Copyright © 1999 Cambridge University Press

WHAT WAS EVERYTHING HE TOLD HER SHE DID?

(JOHN 4.17–18, 29, 39)

CHARLES HOMER GIBLIN SJ
Fordham University, The Bronx, NY 10458–5198, USA

Twice (John 4.29, 39), the Samaritan woman is said to have reported to her townspeople that a man had told her '*everything*' she did. One may surmise that those whom she told knew rather well precisely what the things were that she had done, for they followed her urging to see this remarkably perceptive stranger. Precisely what did Jesus tell her that so moved her and others, and how did he go about it?

Jesus is regularly supposed to have told the Samaritan woman (John 4.17b–18) that she was married five times and was now living with someone she had not married.[1] This assumption renders it unlikely that Jesus is challenging her morality. Instead, it centres the theological issue in v. 18 on Jesus' revelation to the woman of the supernatural knowledge he possesses.[2] Accordingly, his reason for 'abruptly' changing the subject at v. 16 remains unexplained.[3] Nor does it become clear how the fact or nature of his super-

[1] This generally accepted view has been unchallenged, even by Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1–42* (WUNT 2.31; Tübingen: Mohr, 1988) 108–9.

Occasionally, one still finds the 'symbolic' interpretation that the men refer to Samaritan false gods. This view neglects the personal nature of the dialogue and the actual worship of the Samaritans at the time; cf. M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Jean* (Paris: Gabalda, 5th edn, 1936) 109–10, n. 17s., who adds: 'C'est invention de pédants trop au courant des livres.' A fuller refutation is given by Okure, developing R. Schnackenburg; *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, 88–9.

The assumption that Jesus is referring to a rabbinical restriction of the number of marriages has nothing in John's theological concerns to commend it; moreover, the tradition seems to be late (*Yebamot* 64 *baraita*).

[2] As in Okure's view, *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, 111.

[3] Eugene Botha singles this out as a major problem in interpreting the dialogue: 'John 4:16: A Difficult Text Speech Act Theoretically Revisited', in Mark W. G. Stibbe, ed., *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (NTTS 17; Leiden: Brill, 1993) 183–92, 183–4 (reprinted from *Scripture* 35 [1990] 1–9). He thinks that the readers are to understand that the woman's interpretation is wrong and that they should not follow it: 'A Difficult Text Speech Act', 190. This interpretation slights the positive intention of the chief personage in the dialogue. Botha does not seem appreciatively to have resolved this difficulty in his later monograph, *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Speech Act Reading of John 4:1–42* (NovTSup 65; Leiden: Brill, 1991) 132.

J. L. Ska's attention to a type-scene alluding to OT wooing scenes provides a helpful allusive

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688598001489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

j:s148 24-5-1999 p:3 c:0

natural knowledge effectively bears on the subsequent half of his dialogue with the woman. If, however, one attends to word-play in Jesus' reply that specifies her illicit relationships,[4] one can behold the whole dialogue opening up like a flower. Various related elements become much more coherent: Jesus' giving her 'the story of her life'; the reasons for the apparently abrupt change of subject at v. 16; the telling effect of Jesus' self-identification in v. 25.

When reading Jesus' dialogue with the woman from its outset (4.7) to v. 15, one becomes aware of the fact that this conversation is going nowhere. Jesus is repeatedly trying to bring the woman to ask for what he himself mysteriously has to offer. He has presented his 'gift' as a kind of secret[5] by indicating that, if she knew the gift of God and who it is who is asking her for a drink of water, she would have made a request of him, and he would have given her living water. She then challenges his power to draw the water: he has no bucket, nor is he likely to be the equal of Jacob, who gave her people this well in an originally dramatic way, namely, with an artesian surge that nourished his children and his flocks. Jesus then characterizes the water he offers to give as quenching thirst forever and becoming an effervescing source for everlasting life. Finally (v. 15) the woman mockingly asks for the lasting, internal water that Jesus offers (τοῦτο τὸ ὕδωρ) so that she will not thirst or have to come this way to draw. She fails to understand the kind of water that he promises, for she speaks of it as a kind of water that differs only by quenching (physical) thirst permanently and by not having to be fetched by walking to a well. She seems, moreover, to be 'humouring' Jesus with a tinge of sarcasm. Surely, she is not asking *seriously* for the kind of water that he has been talking about. The reader should readily perceive that there is no communication here on the level of religious dialogue.

Jesus, however, turns her 'apparent' request to his advantage. He pretends that it is genuine, although his language soon shows that he knows it was not.[6] He places a condition on her acquiring the water he offers, namely, that she call her 'man' (τὸν ἄνδρα σου), here readily construed as 'your husband'. This deft change of topic (ostensibly introducing a third person, related to the woman addressed) provides a new point of departure for the conversation

context for shifts in the dialogue, but hardly supplies an adequate analysis for the main line of the discourse: 'Jésus et la Samaritaine (*Jn 4*). Utilité de l'ancien testament', *NRT* 118 (1996) 641–52, 641, 645–6.

[4] Maldonatus, following John Chrysostom, thinks that all the woman's relationships with men were illegitimate, although neither seems to have observed a play on the word 'man (ἀνήρ)'. Luis Maria Jimenez Font, ed., *P. Juan de Maldonado, S.I., Comentarios a los Cuatro Evangelios III: Evangelio de San Juan* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1954) 251–2. Cf. Juan Leal, Severiano del Paramo, José Alonso, *La Sagrada Escritura. Texto y comentario por Profesores de la Compañia de Jesús. Nuevo Testamento I. Evangelios* (Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1961) 881: '*Cinco*. Es dificil que todos hubieran sido legítimos, que hubieran ido muriendo sucesivamente. El hecho de que ahora viva ilegalmente favorece también la explicación del Crisóstomo, Maldonado y otros, que los suponen todos ilegítimos.'

[5] Cp. the note of 'secret food' at the beginning of Jesus' discourse with his disciples (4.32). There, however, he immediately clarifies for them the spiritual level, and proceeds to develop it in terms of the harvest effected by his Father and himself; see C. H. Giblin, 'The Miraculous Crossing of the Sea (John 6.16–21)', *NTS* 29 (1983) 96–103, 99–100.

[6] He later (vv. 17b–18) singles out her admission that she has no man as '*This* you said is true (τοῦτο ἀληθὲς εἴρηκας).'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688598001489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

j:s148 24-5-1999 p:4 c:0

between these two individuals. As soon appears, Jesus' ploy in probing for a moral nerve enables him to raise the level of communication to dialogue about religious issues.

Jesus' change of topic at this point is not altogether abrupt. It should be construed as quite consistent with his line of conversation thus far, for two reasons. First, at the outset of their conversation, when the woman had expressed surprise at his request, he introduced the note of a secret he could and would disclose: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you . . . you would have made a request of him, and he would have given you living water (4.10).' In v. 15, the woman *apparently* makes that suggested request, however sarcastically, and thus provides Jesus with the opportunity to pick up the note of mystery by offering to let in on his secret her 'man' too (scil., her husband). Second, the circumstances of a lone woman's coming to a well at high noon, given the customs of the day that John's reader (and surely Jesus himself) can be assumed to know,[7] suggest that Jesus may be trying gently to entice her into a moral and therefore religious level of discussion. The specific details of her life are by no means clear, but her conduct does arouse one's curiosity.

The woman's dissembling yet honest reply, 'I have no man (οὐκ ἔχω ἄνδρα)', which she means to be construed as 'no husband', receives an immediate response from Jesus (vv. 17b–18). The term 'man' (ἀνήρ), an adult human male (whether a single man, a lover, or a husband) provides the basis for his play on words. Jesus frames his riposte with paired, ironic compliments on the skilful aptness of her response and its truthfulness: 'Nicely said (καλῶς εἶπας ὅτι) . . .; *this* you have said is true (τοῦτο ἀληθὲς εἴρηκας).' He then interprets her reply as he sees through it: 'You had five men (ἄνδρας – in the sense of "lovers, co-fornicators") and now the one you have is not your man (οὐκ ἔστιν σου ἀνήρ – in the sense of "*your* husband").' In short, she is not married and never was. She has lived with five men and the one with whom she now lives is not *her* man (scil., husband), but belongs to some other woman. Jesus is hardly speaking about five stages of widowhood and one of fornication. Rather, he pointedly indicates that she never was and is not now married. Instead, she had spent her life with five lovers, and is currently living, as the emphatic 'your' shows (καὶ νῦν ὃν ἔχεις οὐκ ἔστιν σου ἀνήρ),[8] in an

[7] Commentators have long recognized that it was customary for women to come together at a well, especially in the morning and evening hours, and that this woman's conduct raises questions about her socio-moral acceptability to other women.

[8] Contrast the normal position of σου in v. 16. The emphatic position of the personal pronoun in v. 18 (σου preceding rather than following the noun [ἀνήρ] it modifies) may be discerned by comparing other Johannine texts. For instance, Mary's words to Jesus upon meeting him are identical to those of her sister Martha *except for the emphasis*, which brings out her regard for her 'very own' (scil., 'dear') brother; compare Mary's statement, '. . . μου ἀπέθανεν ὁ ἀδελφός' (11.32b) with Martha's, '. . . ἀπέθανεν ὁ ἀδελφός μου' (11.21b). In the account of the cure of the man born blind, the one *whose* mud was used is emphasized (9.6) as is repeatedly the one *whose* eyes were opened (note the position of personal pronouns in vv. 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 21, 26, 30; whereas in v. 23 one finds the non-emphatic οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ).

The members of the Sanhedrin fear that the Romans will come 'and take away (what is) ours, both the place [i.e. the temple] and the nation (ἡμῶν καὶ τὸν τόπον καὶ τὸ ἔθνος).' The emphatic ἡμῶν (11.48b) stresses their self-interest, as R. Schnackenburg observes, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1971) 2.448. It is precisely the Sanhedrists' self-centred view that Caiaphas attacks, and against which he ironically prophesies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688598001489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

j:s148 24-5-1999 p:5 c:0

adulterous relationship.

John does not introduce this paronomasia as a novelty. In the only previous dialogue, that between Jesus and Nicodemus, he employed obvious and exegetically important plays on words: first, that on ἄνωθεν ('again/from on high') (3.3, 7) and, second, that on πνεῦμα ('wind/spirit') (3.6–8). Thus, John's reader has been prepared to perceive in this next dialogue a key turn of thought involving word-play. There are, of course, important differences. In the discourse with Nicodemus, the word-play helped direct Nicodemus's recognition of Jesus' prophetic ('God-sent') working of signs to its adequate explanation, namely, the further, related issue of Jesus' personal testimony to the mystery of divine power. In the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, the play on words prompts a minimal response, namely, the woman's recognition of Jesus' prophetic rebuke (4.19). Jesus has touched a moral nerve that enables the conversation to rise to the level of a *religious* dialogue.

Prophets had two basic roles: to proclaim the moral law (the code) in fulfilment of the covenant and to insist on the true form of worship (the correct cult). The Samaritan woman deflects the obvious intent of Jesus' prophetic word, that of challenging her moral conduct. In changing the topic somewhat, she also defuses the personal immediacy of Jesus' remarks. For she introduces the topic of cult (4.20) in terms of the plural: 'our fathers worshipped . . . you people [pl.] say . . .'. Jesus begins by accepting her change of topic, but in such a way as to move beyond a nationally or racially conceived centre of worship.[9] He focuses her attention on the proper dispositions of the worshipper according to the Father's intention[10] and transcendent being as revealed by Jesus.

The woman responds appropriately enough. For she sees that it must mean at least the fullness of God's revelation: 'When he (the Messiah) comes, he will *tell us* (*reveal to us*) *everything*.' In identifying himself, Jesus also tellingly redirects the dialogue to centre on his personal contact with the woman. He returns the dialogue to the singular: '*I* am *he*, *the one speaking* with *you* [sg.].'

At this point, one may sense that a light-bulb goes on in the woman's mind. For, subsequently, she makes her confession to the people in the city by inviting them to come and see a man who told her *everything* she did (4.29). In John's narrative, of course, the moment of illumination finds dramatic expression. By leaving her water-jug as she departs for the city, she shows that she has set aside her original concern.[11] In disclosing her whole life-story, Jesus has revealed to her personally that he is the Messiah.[12] She

[9] John's reader is probably expected to construe 'the hour that is coming' in the light of Jesus' statements about himself as the new sanctuary, to be realized through his death and resurrection (2.18–22).

[10] Worship in spirit and in truth means worship in tune with God's transcendent being (spirit as contrasted with flesh) according to Jesus' revelation of it; cf. 3.6; 6.63.

[11] Jesus' disciples' arrival provides the *occasion* for her departure. They do not, however, 'scare her off'. Although amazed at Jesus' conduct, they voice no objection. At most, their arrival helps define the fitting end to Jesus' private dialogue with the woman.

[12] Although John presents her messianic expectations in Christian terms (Μεσσίας . . . ὁ λεγόμενος Χριστός, v. 25), the messianic function she indicates (that of a revealer) requires the reader to construe 'messiah' here in line with Samaritan expectations of the *tahêb*, the prophet like Moses.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688598001489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

j:s148 24-5-1999 p:6 c:0

phrases her message to the Samaritans in the city as a cautious assertion (μήτι, v. 29b). Nevertheless, as becomes clear in v. 29, they take it quite positively and integrally as 'testimony'. Under the circumstances, her confession hardly means that Jesus is merely one with preternatural knowledge about 'morally neutral data' of her past life (as would be the case if he had told her among other things that she was married five times).[13] Rather, it implies a moral confession about this stranger's prophetic knowledge and rebuke concerning a sinful way of life that her Samaritan hearers already knew she had led.

One may sense the importance of her testimony as a personal recognition of Jesus from the Samaritans' reference to it in vv. 39 and 40. Actually, they do not 'put her down' by saying that they no longer (οὐκέτι) believe because of what she said (v. 42). Rather, they declare a new basis for their own belief in Jesus through having heard personally, for themselves, what he has to say (vv. 41b and 42b).

CONCLUSION

With John 4.15, it becomes clear that the Samaritan woman does not really comprehend the kind of water Jesus has offered her. Jesus' dialogue with her has not reached the needed level of communication. Jesus takes her somewhat mocking request, however, as the occasion to press the hidden gift he would offer. He asks her to call her 'man' (τὸν ἄνδρα σου), readily taken in context to mean her 'husband'. When she replies that she has none, Jesus ironically commends her frankness and discloses to her the story of her life: she has lived with five men (all instances of fornication) and is now living with a man who is not *her* man (οὐκ ἔστιν σου ἀνήρ), scil., *her* husband (the current adulterous relationship).

She then acknowledges him as a prophet, but at the same time alters the focus in 'a religious discussion with a prophet' from the moral issue to the cultic one. This she tries to render less immediately personal by switching to the first and third persons plural. Jesus pursues the topic, moving from her concern with the place of the cult to the Father's immediate temporal concern in seeking genuine worshippers. This concern requires worship on the level of the spirit and of Jesus' personal revelation (truth). She responds in a not alien way that she (and other Samaritans) expect the Messiah who is coming will tell them everything. When Jesus identifies himself to her personally, she realizes that he has indeed told *her* 'everything', namely, the story of her life. She then has reason to share with her countrymen her own experience in recognizing Jesus as the one whom they all await.

[13] John never portrays Jesus' indication of his prior, mysterious knowledge of another's actions or attitudes as a kind of 'showing off' of factual knowledge. It is regularly depicted as having moral and/or doctrinal relevance (e.g. 1.46–51; 6.63–5, 70–1; 20.27).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688598001489 Published online by Cambridge University Press