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The Samaritan Woman's Story
Reconsidering John 4 After #ChurchToo

February 15, 2022 | \$24, 224 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0060-1

Most Christians are familiar with this picture of the woman at the well: a sinner, an adulteress, even a prostitute. Exploring the reception history of John 4, Caryn Reeder challenges common interpretational assumptions about women and sexuality, yielding fresh insights from the story's original context and offering a bold challenge to teach the Bible in a way that truly values the voices of women.

Reading the Samaritan Woman's Story with the Church

Christian interpretations of John 4:4-42 frequently focus on the significance of Jesus' words for doctrines of God and church practices like baptism and worship. The woman herself may be mentioned only as the recipient of Jesus' teachings. Interpreters who pay attention to the woman face a problem. In John 4, Jesus shares deep theological truths with someone whom interpreters most often characterize as poor, uneducated, shockingly immoral, and limited by the constraints of gender. And yet this person is also a successful evangelist.

The majority interpretation of John 4:4-42 from the third century on reveals a tendency to sexualize the Samaritan woman in negative ways. She is accused of adultery and prostitution. She is made responsible for the endings of her multiple marriages in divorce, for her own desire to remarry, and for her situation of sinful, nonmarital cohabitation.

As a consequence of these choices, in the majority interpretation the woman's responses to Jesus are condemned as mouthy, rude, and ignorant. Her questions become attempts to hide her own personal sin. Her testimony to her neighbors is sometimes minimized as gossip, or (in the case of John Calvin) dehumanized by comparison with inanimate objects.

Because the woman is defined as a sexual sinner, her words can have no power. Because interpreters disempower her words, they make her presumed sexual history an essential concern of her interaction with Jesus. The Samaritan woman becomes an example of God's amazing grace that can encompass even a terrible sinner like this.

This message is powerful, to be sure. But, Miguel De La Torre notes, these interpretive moves prevent men and women in the church from identifying the Samaritan woman as an example of women's leadership. "After all," he adds, "if the woman at the well or Mary of Magdala are sluts and whores (interesting that men are never given these titles), how could they serve as paragons to emulate or have anything virtuous to contribute to the conversation?" The reductive sexualization of the Samaritan woman (and other biblical women) contributes to the minimization of women in Christian communities.

The focus on the Samaritan woman's sin in the majority interpretation fundamentally misrepresents John 4:4-42. This focus ignores important aspects of the social and cultural setting of her story: the limitations of women's marital rights; the involvement of (primarily male) family members in arranging marriages and divorces; the basic definition of marriage around economics rather than relationship.

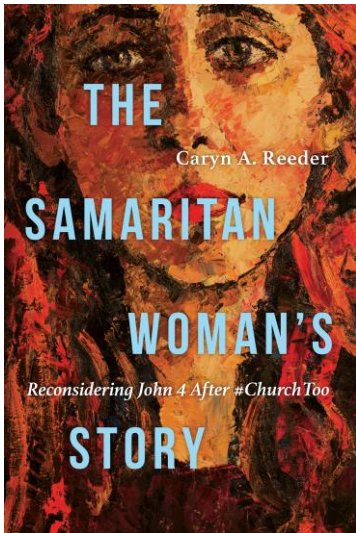
A focus on the woman's perceived sin also ignores the evidence of John 4:4-42 itself. In contrast to other narratives in the Gospel, there is no mention of "sin" in this story. There is no reason to import it. Jesus' reference to the woman's marital history does not need to be interpreted as an accusation of sin, and her responses to Jesus should not be read through the lens of sin. The Samaritan woman's story is instead about the work of witnessing to Jesus and the new way of being the people of God that Jesus introduces.



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Without the lens of sin blinding us, we can see John 4:4-42 more clearly. First, the Samaritan woman expresses wisdom, thoughtfulness, and awareness throughout her conversation with Jesus. She is an intelligent partner for Jesus in a way that Nicodemus is not. In this sense, the story challenges the values we place on status and identity.

Second, the emphasis on the division between the Jews and Samaritans throughout John 4:4-42 frames a remarkable message of inclusivity. Worship is open to all, because it is no longer bound to one place. A Samaritan receives Jesus' life-giving water, and it flows out of her into her entire community. The Samaritans' recognition of Jesus as "Savior of the world" reinforces Jesus' statement of purpose in John 3:17.

Third, as Jerome said, the Samaritan woman's faith satisfied Jesus' hunger and thirst (Jn 4:31-34). Within John's Gospel, the Samaritan woman models discipleship through her gradual recognition of Jesus' identity and her response of witnessing to others in her community. Jesus' own metaphor of planting and harvesting in John 4:35-38 further marks the woman as his colleague in the work of witness, of sowing the word of God.

The Samaritan woman's story offers one of many biblical examples of women's work as preachers and teachers in Christian communities. This reading of John 4:4-42 disrupts the perspectives that allow for the victimization of women in Christian communities. Instead of a sexualized sinner, the woman becomes an insightful theologian. Instead of a danger to the men around her, she becomes a teacher who helps others understand the truth. This reconsideration of the Samaritan woman's story encourages and empowers women in the church today.

—Adapted from "Conclusion: Reading the Bible After #ChurchToo"



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Q & A

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Caryn A. Reeder (PhD, University of Cambridge) is professor of New Testament and co-coordinator of the Gender Studies program at Westmont College. Her books include *The Enemy in the Household: Family Violence in Deuteronomy and Beyond* and *Gendering War and Peace in the Gospel of Luke*.

Biblical Interpretation for the Life of the Church

What led to your interest in writing about John 4 and the #ChurchToo Movement?

Caryn A. Reeder: As I watched the #ChurchToo movement grow out of #MeToo in 2017 and 2018, I became deeply angry. As I say in the book, “How has the church created a space in which abusers are enabled and the people they abuse are silenced and shamed? Why has the church been so slow to acknowledge the evil we have done, repent, and change?” I have appreciated the growing recognition of and responses to the crisis of sexual assault in different churches and Christian organizations, but—as ongoing revelations of abuse indicate—there is significantly more work to do to address the problem, help survivors heal, and prevent further abuse.

As a biblical scholar, I recognize that Christian interpretations of biblical stories like John 4 have contributed to the problem of sexual assault made apparent in the #ChurchToo movement. In sermons, Bible studies, devotionals, and more, the women of the Bible have often been sexualized, even when sex or marriage are not part of their stories. Once they are sexualized, their contributions to the story—to the kingdom of God—are minimized. That is, the reductive sexualization of biblical women limits the significance of these women and their stories. The sexualization and minimization of biblical women spills over to women in our churches, making abuse possible.

So, I wrote this book to respond to this particular aspect of the crisis revealed by #ChurchToo. I provide a model for questioning the potentially problematic implications of biblical interpretation, and I reinvestigate the stories we think we know to see if we may have missed key messages. Ultimately, I seek to explain how we might read the Samaritan woman's story after #ChurchToo, to protect the vulnerable, counteract negative messages concerning women, and affirm women as participants (and leaders) in the church.

As you show in the first part of your book, the Samaritan woman's story has been interpreted in very similar ways from the third century until today. How do you justify challenging this long-established tradition of interpretation?

Reeder: This is an important concern. Whenever someone comes up with a revolutionary new interpretation of the Bible, it's important to be cautious! However, I'm definitely not the first person to question the established interpretation of the Samaritan woman as an adulterer or prostitute. Argula von Grumbach and Marie Dentièrre in the sixteenth century both rejected this interpretation. They used John 4:4-42 to argue for women's right to participate fully in the life of the church, including by speaking and preaching. This alternative interpretation resurfaces in the work of other women interpreters through the twentieth century. Today, many (maybe even most) scholars agree with their conclusions. My own challenge to the standard interpretation of John 4 is part of a larger reckoning.

Why do you think it is so important to challenge the interpretation of the Samaritan woman as an adulterer or prostitute?

Reeder: In the standard interpretation of John 4:4-42, the condemnation of the Samaritan woman for sexual sin overrides the rest of her story. Interpreters claim that she was a social outcast, that she couldn't understand Jesus, and even that she lied to Jesus to hide her sin. But if we set aside the issue of sexual sin, the woman is instead a smart, knowledgeable conversation



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partner for Jesus. She understood his revolutionary message concerning the identity of God's people, and she told her neighbors about him. They clearly respected her—they immediately went out to meet Jesus based only on the woman's testimony, and they believed because of her word as much as Jesus's word.

The standard interpretation of the story effectively hides this message, to the detriment of the church. As I argue in the book, John 4 is not a story about a woman's sexual sin. It is instead a story about Jesus revealing his own identity to a woman who promptly shares her news with her community. In John's Gospel, the Samaritan woman represents the ideal disciple. She is a model for women and men in the church to follow.

You relate the interpretation of the Bible with the abuse of women in the church. Can you explain this connection?

Reeder: Yes, absolutely. The connection is a bit surprising or shocking, right? But, unfortunately, I think it's something we need to consider. In her book *The #MeToo Reckoning*, Ruth Everhart asks how we interpret the Bible in ways that make women "rape-able." What she's getting at is this: Our interpretations of women in biblical narratives shape how we think about—and treat—women in our churches (and beyond). This process becomes problematic and even dangerous when particular interpretations of women are repeated over and over.

To focus on the Samaritan woman's marital history as the defining aspect of her character and her role in the narrative suggests that she is only interesting or important with respect to her sexuality. When the same message is applied to other biblical women—Bathsheba, Mary Magdalene, the woman who anoints Jesus—the implication is that all women are interesting or important only with respect to sexuality. This pattern of interpretation can limit us from seeing women in other ways—as evangelists and preachers and politicians, for instance, in the case of these biblical women. It marks women out as objects for men to desire, and (as a consequence) "stumbling blocks" who tempt men into sin. These intersecting messages make women's bodies available to men and also make the women complicit in any action the men might take. The reductive sexualization of women in the Bible allows and enables the abuse of women in the church.

You argue that, in John 4, the Samaritan woman is not presented as a sinner—despite Jesus's reference to her marital history and her current nonmarital relationship. Can you say a little more about this? Why does Jesus bring up her marital history if not to convict her of sin?

Reeder: Sin is a significant concern in John's Gospel, but the word *sin* does not appear in John 4:4-42. There were legitimate reasons a woman in the first century might have multiple marriages or an informal (but still socially and morally acceptable) relationship. It's also important to recognize that marriages were arranged by women's families for economic and social benefits. Finally, the woman's community clearly respected her—they listened to her and accepted her testimony about Jesus. So, without any clear indications that the woman's marital history was sinful within her cultural context, we should be very cautious about inserting sin into her story.

So why did Jesus bring up the woman's marital history? The story itself tells us. Jesus's knowledge of this woman's life let her recognize him as a prophet. She was then able to ask him an important theological question: Are the Jews the true people of God, or the Samaritans? Their conversation was not about sin but rather Jesus's redefinition of the people of God as those who worship God in spirit and truth.



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Why do you think the Samaritan woman's story matters for the church? Why should we pay attention to this one narrative, and what should we be learning from it?

Reeder: I see so many important messages in this story—messages that remain as relevant today as they were in the first century. First, the narrative's emphasis on the divisions and tensions between the Jews and Samaritans frames Jesus' remarkable announcement of inclusivity. Second, Jesus delivered his announcement to a Samaritan woman, and she—not the male, Jewish disciples—testified to him in her village. Her story reminds us of the many ways women contribute to the kingdom of God. Moreover, within John's Gospel, this nameless Samaritan woman models discipleship. We should be representing biblical women like her as role models for women and men in the church.

Who should read this book?

Reeder: I want this book to be a resource for Christians in responding to the crisis of sexual assault in church and parachurch communities. It is also for anyone who has wondered what life was like for the women of the Bible, questioned how the church has interpreted biblical women's stories, or wanted to see biblical women as role models for women and men in the church today.



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