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J. Duncan M. Derrett

The Samaritan Woman's Purity (John 4:4-52)

Professor Derrett was originally an expert in oriental law. From application of his specialist knowledge to Law in the New Testament (London, 1970) he has moved increasingly into study of the Jewish background of the New Testament and has a wealth of learned books and essays to his credit.

The opening verses of John's fourth chapter give attention to Jesus' baptizing, indeed to baptism generally. As we read on we encounter Samaritan converts. Were they baptized? Of course they could have been. If baptism hangs in the air, as it were, it can (perhaps must) at least suggest cleansing and therefore purity. And then we have the strange colloquy with the Samaritan Woman. She is, at first sight, hardly an attractive character, and we might not have selected her as a minister of the Word. Sent by the Lord (Jn. 4:16 *hypage*, 'Off with you!', cf. Mk. 5:19) she becomes an impressive witness, and, as one *sent*, an apostle (*šalīah/apostolos* means simply 'one sent'). The Samaritan Woman, after trying some blundering sarcasm with Jesus (4:11-12) closes some sort of bargain with him, rushes off, and makes concentrated propaganda for the Messiah (4:28-30,39,42).

How comes so strange a personage, not merely a woman, itself then handicap enough, but a Samaritaness at that, to be recruited in the deliberate manner which Jesus has contrived, to act actually as a *container* for a source of life? Now there is a secret in the text, not obscure to a Jewish reader, opaque to our commentators, ancient as well as modern. John has defeated more than one recent student who thought he had unwound every strand of this complex rope of Johannine insinuation.¹ The disciples themselves could not make out what Jesus was up to, and if they tactfully abstained from questioning him (4:27) *we*

¹ J. D. M. Derrett, 'The Samaritan Woman's pitcher', *Downside Rev.* 349, 1984, 252-61, making extensive use of B. Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel* (Lund, 1974), which handles both Jn. 2:1-11 and 4:1-42.

have to work at the scene on the well-worn assumption that every one of us is at an advantage over Jesus' contemporary disciples.

Jesus is sitting by Jacob's well, and the scene reminds us of various patriarchs' sitting, or at least being, by wells, celebrated biblical incidents which led to important marriages in the ancestry of the old Israel and, of course, of the Messiah.² So the subject of *fertility* (water, crops, progeny, harvest) broods over the whole setting (cf. 4:37-38). Jews are very familiar with *spiritual progeny* (i.e. proselytes), and consistently interpret Gn. 12:5 in the light of this: the word 'belly' at Jn. 7:38 points in the same direction, and one should compare the repeated word *splagchna* in Phm. 7,12,20.

7 A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' 8 For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How do you, a Jew, ask for drink from me, a Samaritan woman. For Jews do not make use of Samaritans (for such purposes)?'³ 10 Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would ask him, and he would have given you living water.' 11 The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep; whence do you have that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his sheep?' 13 Jesus answered and said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of *this* water will thirst again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that *I* shall give him will not thirst again for ever. The water than I shall give him will become *in him* a spring (or fountain) of water welling up to eternal life.' 15 The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may not thirst, nor tramp here to draw.'

The woman's naivety is comic, but we must beware: gospel irony often depicts truths under the guise of error. Jacob's well is very deep.⁴ It is a puzzle why it is there, made as it was, at evident expense, while excellent perennial springs are not far off. It illustrates the biblical saying, as effective metaphorically as it is

² See Gn. 24; 29; Ex. 2.

³ The Greek *ou gar sygchrōntai* has given persistent difficulty, unnecessarily. It represents Mishnaic Hebrew *ki 'en mištamšin be'*, which means 'do not utilize' (as a matter of good practice). There is an exact parallel at Babylonian Talmud, *Ḳidd.* 70a (the root is *šmš*, 'to serve').

⁴ A. P. Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine* (London, 1864), 241; Andrew Thomson, *In the Holy Land* (London, 1886), 215; G. A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (4th ed., London, 1897), 386-74; G. Dalman, *Sacred Sites and Ways* (London, 1935), 213-15; C. Kopp, *The Holy Places in the Gospel* (Freiburg, Edinburgh, and London, 1963), 155-66.

literally. that one should drink from one's own cistern,⁵ for the need for it may have arisen from the landowners being afraid that their access to the springs might become precarious (cf. La. 5:4).

So the woman came with her pitcher; and the water-raising mechanism, with its (leather?) bucket firmly attached, was operated laboriously, a typically feminine task. Jesus uses the occasion for a sermon, one of the most impressive in the fourth gospel. We are to understand that she did give Jesus water from her pitcher, and that Jesus gave her 'living water' in return (vv. 15-16).

John emphasizes the gift aspect.⁶ The 'gift of God' here derives, in literary terms, from Is. 12:1-6, a text remembered at the water-drawing ceremonies during the Feast of Tabernacles, into which we need not go. Verse 3 says 'with joy shall you draw water out of the wells of salvation'. Now no gift is fully gratuitous, whatever it may be in law: there is always some exchange in view, perhaps the more important for being less visible. Here the talk is about *ingesting* things. John knew that Jesus had rejected the idea of *buying* food at the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mk. 6:36; Jn. 6:5-6) and accepted, instead, an only apparently inadequate *gift* (Mk. 6:41; Jn. 6:11). Here the disciples actually went to buy food though they were religious students and might otherwise have relied on what is now termed charity, because it was not customary for pious Jews to take the food of Samaritans,⁷ whom they could not entertain in return. The rabbis emphasized a proposition illustrated in the Qumran sect, that if one takes gratuitously the food of persons of impure life (or suspected of impurity) one is contaminated by it (Ps. 141:4): but that does not prevent one's *buying* it.⁸ At the Feedings Jesus uses exclusively the food of his own disciples.

The Samaritan's quaint mention of Jesus' (non-existent) bucket must be construed with another passage. She came to *draw* water, which she would take home in her pitcher. Actually she *left* the pitcher (4:28), having no need of *that* container, so that she took the pure living water home inside herself, leaving the inferior well water behind. I must explain this, but first let us avail ourselves of the clue John provided at 2:5-8.

⁵ Pr 5:15; Is. 36:16. The waters of Pr. 5:16 are progeny.

⁶ *Dos* at vv. 7,10; *edöken* at 12; *dösö* (twice) at 14; *dos* at 15.

⁷ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London, 1969), 354-8. Lk. 9:51-56 suggests that Jesus was not so fussy; v. 56 that he was successful. At Babylonian Talmud, Hull. 17a we find the suggestion that campaigners in Canaan may ignore dietary laws.

⁸ 1 QS V. 14-20. Mk. 14:5; Mt. 26-9; Jn. 12:5 explained at J. D. M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London, 1970), 268-70.

5 His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' 6 Now six stone jars were there, set up according to the purification of the Jews, each holding (the equivalent of) twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. 8 He said to them, 'Now draw out, and take it to the steward of the feast (master of ceremonies).' And they took it.

A Jewish reader would be amused at Jesus' choice of water, a strange perversity. In a region where flowing water was rare, and where pools, artificial or natural, fed from rain or from springs or dew ponds, are scarce, people must perforce make do with *drawn water* when they want to purify themselves for prayer or for eating common food. Pharisees would insist on temple-standards being observed even with common food (Mk. 7:4); but the shortage of immersion-pools (*miqwôt*) would tend to frustrate their particularity. The best water for purification is *living water*.⁹

Now the expression, Heb. *mayim hayyim*, means (i), water of life, and (ii), spring water. Spring-water carries the life-principle,¹⁰ and conveys purification in the contexts of the leper's cleansing, the formerly leprous house, the man with an issue, and the ashes of the Red Heifer¹¹—only one of these will concern us—and no inferior water will serve.¹² Now the stone jars, about which we have such detail (stone is a protection against contamination), add up approximately to a standard immersion-pool. But they not only (i), hold drawn water, which is invalid for immersion, and used only in very marginal cases, but (ii), contain 'topping-up' with drawn water, a rabbinically questionable act in any case (immersion-pools, however dirty, must not be replenished with drawn water),¹³ and (iii), are then drawn off from still further (for serving)—a three-fold 'drawing'. Though the water was kept for the *purifying* of 'the Jews' it was the worst possible for its ostensible purpose. It was from this that Jesus makes the finest wine. No doubt continuity with the old Israel is indicated, but more important than continuity is the implication that Jesus can provide the wine which suggests the messianic banquet, wine of purity such as no human precaution can rival,

⁹ Mishnah, Miḳ. 1:8 (Lv. 15:13). Zc. 14:8 is relevant to us.

¹⁰ P. Reymond, *L'eau, sa vie, et sa signification dans l'Ancient Testament* (Leiden, 1958), 229.

¹¹ Ibid. (Lv. 14:5-7, 50-52; 15:13; Nu. 19).

¹² See last n. Subject to the rule of the 9 *ḳabs* of poured water for those utterly prevented from immersion (neglect modern developments). W. Brandt, *Die jüdischen Baptismen oder das religiöse Waschen und Baden im Judentum mit Einschluss des Judenchristentums* (Giessen, 1910), 142. Our model is Lv. 15:13 (the *zāv*, male counterpart of the menorrhagic female—his purification is completed after immersion in living water).

¹³ Mishnah, Miḳ. 2:4.

out of everyday materials, and third-rate materials at that. *Poured water* (*hydata cheomena*) is of such inferior quality as actually to be mentioned pejoratively by Jesus in an agraphon preserved among the Oxyrhynchus papyri.^{13a}

We return to our Samaritan Woman. Any Jewess would have lamented if no spring water was available to her and her immediate associates. For they could not purify themselves to partake of consecrated food, dedicated by men and women, never mind some 'gift of God'. Spring water would be valued by Samaritans too. We know nothing about their tithing, etc., but Samaritans will have observed the pentateuchal priestly dues, and rules, corresponding to the Jews', about the purity in which they must be consumed; and for Passover, at least, purity must have been requisite. Now this women happened to be morally crippled as well as unable to reach a spring easily. She may not have been actually promiscuous, but her family life (she confesses: cf. Je. 2:13) was chaotic (4: 18–19, 29, 39). Greeks and Jews agreed that sexual irregularities *defiled*. The food of a sexually irregular woman will surely have defiled. But to make matters worse, Samaritan women were suspected of immorality generally and a rabbinical maxim, older than St John, tells us that all Samaritan women were to be deemed perpetual menstruants¹⁴—an unpleasant idea which suggests sterility.

This deserves to be pondered on. After menstruation a woman immersed herself: in Jewish circles of 'visible piety' they still do. Lv. 15:28 read with its Targum and the LXX leaves us in no doubt that irregular menstruants must immerse at the cessation of their flow. But a perpetual menstruant is debarred from that which society most requires of her: cf. Mk. 5:29; Lk. 8:44. The rabbinical decree is a ban on all intercourse with Samaritan women, since no Jews will have intimacy with a woman whom they suspect has a menstrual flow, of whatever character (Lv. 15:19–30). They will not keep company with her (even sit with her: notice how this woman does not sit with Jesus). The Jews believed menstruation, normal or pathological, emerged from the woman's *fountain* (Ps. 68:27 as interpreted at Bab. Tal., Ket 7b). The Hebrew is *māqôr* (Lv. 12:7; 20:18), the Greek *pēgē*. We

^{13a} Oxyr. Pap. V 840, known since 1907, at lines 32–33 raises this point of rabbinical (or at any rate Jewish) law which has eluded editors. For the bibliography see the section devoted to the agraphon ('Jesus meets a Pharisaical chief priest . . .') in J. Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus* (London, 1st edn., 1957, 2nd edn., 1964). On the passage now see D. R. Schwartz at NTS 32 (1986), 153–9.

¹⁴ Mishnah, Nidd. 4:1; Tosefta, Nidd. 5:1. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 357.

remember the episode of the Woman with an Issue of Blood, with its intriguing details.¹⁵ Since the clothing of such a woman will convey to anyone who sits on it, or handles it, a 'ritual' impurity, she guessed that the clothing of someone who was a source of purity could counteract that 'fountain'. And it did: we are in no position to argue with that woman's logic (cf. Hg. 2:12). So in this case, the Samaritan, having a 'fountain' presumed to be a perpetual source of impurity, is offered by Jesus an alternative source (*pāgē*, v. 14) which will, instead of defiling everyone who comes within reach of it (Mk. 7:15,20), spring up for everlasting life (which of course menstrual blood most certainly does not). Not only is this gift a spring of living water, for the purification of herself, but also a means whereby others than the possessor may be infected, as it were, with Life. Jn. 7:37-38 (cf. Ps. 36:9; Je 17:13) tells us that the one who drinks (see below) of the water Jesus provides produces *rivers* of living water, which, in Jewish idiom, implies endless means whereby an indefinite number of people may be purified—in this case a true, not a merely seeming, purification. It is not so surprising that she rushes off and puts it all into action.

One may ask, why has this not been understood before? Jesus did not need a bucket (in spite of Nu. 24:7), because the water he supplied was the Word, which of course can be ingested (Ps. 119:103, Je. 15:16). The race-free sermon of 4:21-26 is a sample (cf. Lk 17:18). But that is not quite the point. She, not realising that he is a source of purity which may be *drunk* (as Jn. 7:37 tells us), and unaware that Jesus, thoughtfully reported, took the biblical law of purity allegorically (cf. Mk. 7:18-23), supposes that if Jesus has a spring available (the analogy is, no doubt, Moses with that Rock)¹⁶ a bucket will be handy for use with that pitcher. But such water must inevitably be *drawn* (vv. 7,15—note how the technical words encapsulate this part of the story) with the aid of a bucket, it cannot purify her, or any that have dealings with ('make use of') her and could conceivably receive purity through her (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14,16). The bucket, then, symbolizes all that Jesus' gift is *not*. So the question that remains is, how can purity be achieved by drinking (not immersing), hardly a Jewish metaphor? For I will not take Nu 5:28, for

¹⁵ J. Carmignac, *La naissance des Évangiles Synoptiques* (Paris, 1984), 44. If one compares Mk. 5:29 with Lk. 8:44 one observes the superior Jewish (biblical) knowledge of Mark, but cf. LXX Lv. 20:18!

¹⁶ Ex. 17:1-7; Nu. 20:1-13,24; 27:14; 33:14; 1 Cor. 10:4. In Olsson's opinion (*Structure and Meaning* 162-173), more attention should be given to the 'living well' of Nu. 21:16-20.

obvious reasons, as a sufficient authority, interesting as it is. And without our passage even Jn. 2:9–10 begs the question.

If John were to rely solely on Jewish models he would be cramped. Here is a case where he appears to rely on the tradition about Jesus' teaching. John may be presumed to know the synoptic tradition, and, as I believe, he could well have known at least our Luke in written form.¹⁷ The synoptic tradition makes the point that the *insides* of a vessel (including man himself) must be purified (Mt. 23:25–26, adapted at Lk. 11:38–41), and Jewish tradition insists that the water of the pool must enter every surface of that which is immersed. If we are interested in the purity of the *heart*, which according to Jewish tradition is the real object of physical immersions, that too must be immersed. We can proceed on this basis.

One slakes thirst, including 'spiritual' thirst. Baptism and thirst appear in sequence at 1 Cor. 10:2–4, the one prepared for the other, and if baptism can be done symbolically so can the thirst be quenched. The Samaritan Woman says naively that the ancient Jews drank just like their sheep, heedless of purity, with no expectation of being purified. They and their cattle virtually drank together (Gn. 24:17–20,46; Nu. 20:8; 2 Ki. 3:17). Jesus, however, has thought about purity. Men and women are vessels of clay, like the pitcher which is the Woman's *heart* (cf. Ec. 12:6). The inward parts of a vessel are to be cleansed before it can carry consecrated food which will be consumed (cf. Mk. 10:38–39).¹⁸ The Word is holy, and, like the Law as the rabbis saw it,¹⁹ comparable with lifegiving water. The metaphor was indeed biblical: Pr. 18:4 says, 'The words of a man's mouth are deep waters; the wellspring (*māqôr*) of wisdom is a flowing brook', while Pr. 16:22 says that understanding is a well-spring of life (i.e. a living spring: *mēqôr ḥayyîm*) for its owner.

¹⁷ J. D. M. Derrett, *New Resolutions of Old Conundrums* (Shipston on Stour, 1986), index, 'John'. Jn. 13:4–11 should be compared with Lk. 13:35–38; Jn. 10 should be seen in relation to Lk. 11:52; and Jn. 7:30,44; 8:59; 10:39 in relation to Lk. 4:16–30; and Jn. 10:1,16 in relation to Lk. 11:21; while Jn. 21:15 is related to Lk. 7:47.

¹⁸ J. D. M. Derrett, 'Receptacles and tombs (Mt. 23:24–30)', *ZNW* 77, 1986, 255–66. There is an interesting remark by a woman contemplating a second offer of marriage (at Bab. Talm., B.M. 84b) in which she compares herself with a vessel which had contained holy comestibles.

¹⁹ Is. 12:3; 55:1 MT and Targum (Olsson, 214). Pr. 5:15 refers to learning in the Torah: Bab. Talm., (A.Z. 19a (Soncino trans., 99); Sifre, §§ 48, 306 (see R. Hammer, *Sifre. A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* [New Haven, 1986], 102, 305–6).

Those who convey the Word, like stone conduits, can be thought of as purifying, indeed after some time they may even be compared with immersion-pools.²⁰ Immersion, baptism, of vessels and utensils was normal in Jesus' time, and observant Jews still do it. So too were persons immersed who suffered from any of the many causes of 'ritual' impurity. Thus although immersion in a pool might never be open to the Samaritan Woman (the well at 'Sychar' being hopelessly deep for the purpose), she could purify her inward parts by drinking in the living water which Jesus proffered her.

There are those who seriously doubt whether Jesus required any convert of his to be baptized in water, as such;²¹ but, however that may be, there seem to be episodes in the New Testament which depict a spiritual baptism in the course of narratives which, as if incidentally, suggest an action as water-baptism. Each of these must be studied in its own right (Mk. 2:3-4; Lk. 7:38; Jn. 5:7-9; Acts 10:11-16) since the novelty of the idea is somewhat startling. None need detain us at present. But if the Samaritan Woman and her companions exemplify entry into the number of Jesus' disciples through a merely symbolic baptism, the gift of the purifying Word sufficing to render her an 'apostle' in the sense set out earlier in this article, there is a certain coherence between the passages. It is the contrast between Jesus' purification and those of 'the Jews' which is particularly interesting. Jewish immersions (particularly in the case of women) need to be constantly repeated, while Jesus' 'baptism' is not (cf. 4:13-14).²² At all events the Samaritan Woman is purified by the Word, becomes without perceptible delay the means of purifying an indefinite number of others, and these both may and should worship the common Father, in spirit and in truth (i.e. in entire purity)²³ (Ps. 51:6; Pr. 16:16) without a cultic observance of any kind, as the sermon of Jesus is at pains to explain.

²⁰ For they were themselves 'sons of the pneumatic pool', alluding to Acts 2:2 ('the whole house was filled'), according to Basilius Seleucensis (d. after 458), *orat.* 17 (Migne, P.G. 85), a reference I owe to Thomas Gataker, *Opera critica* (Utrecht, 1698), cap. 28, p. 722.

²¹ Gerhard Lohfink, 'Der Ursprung der Christlichen Taufe', *TQ* 156 (1976), 35-54. Willi Marxsen, 'Erwägungen zur neutestamentlichen Begründung der Taufe' in: *Apophoreta, Fest. Ernst Haenchen* (Berlin, 1964), 169-177 took it as nearly axiomatic that Jesus was not the source of the practice.

²² Tertullian, *de Baptismo*, ch. 15 (Migne, P. L. 1.1216): the Jewish Israel washes every day because every day it is defiled.

²³ Cf. the group 'spirit and fire' of Mt. 3:11; Lk. 3:16 (cf. Acts 2:2-3).