

Grounded: in the Body in Time & Place, in Scripture

# At Jacob's Well: Re-grounding the Samaritan Woman

Deborah Storie

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## Meet the author

Deborah Storie is a Baptist Pastor and lectures in Biblical Studies. She previously lived in Afghanistan as part of a community development team and in other roles, evaluated development projects in Africa and Asia, and served on the Board of Tearfund Australia and the foundational Advisory Board of Manna Gum.

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## Chapter overview

How might we read and respond to the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan Woman (John 4) as disciples of Jesus? Until recently, the story was most often interpreted in ways that focused on the woman's dubious reputation, shady past, and alleged immorality, sometimes associating her personal failings with the alleged idolatry of her people. More recent interpreters have tended to valorise the woman. Missiologists claim her as "the first evangelist." Feminists are delighted that John's discourse-heavy Gospel honours her with its longest one-on-one conversation with Jesus. We rarely appreciate how profoundly power, privilege and life experience, as well as time, geography, culture and language, estrange us from the worlds of and behind the text. What happens if we re-ground the encounter at Jacob's well in time and place, in community, and in Scripture? What happens if we invite the experiences of contemporary women who navigate similarly precarious situations to guide our encounters with this text? What happens if we notice the expectations that the time, place and manner of the meeting evoke within Scriptural tradition? What happens if we attend to the layers of meaning conveyed through water and well imagery and the nuances of the Greek text? What types of discipleship response might a re-grounded encounter with this text motivate and generate in our time and place?

## General Study Questions

These questions are designed for small group discussion or individual reflection before reading the chapter.

LISTEN AND REFLECT

Listen to John 4:1–42 (NRSV or NIV) <https://www.biblegateway.com/audio/suchet/nivuk/John.4>

### Question 1

[For those who have never encountered the story before]: What did you make of the story on this first hearing? Share or note down your first impressions and thoughts.

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## Question 2

[For those who have heard the story before]: Remember your previous encounters with this story. What have you taught/been taught about it? What aspects of the story were focused on? What aspects were skipped over?

## Question 3

[For those who have heard the story before]: How was the story applied to our world? What lessons were drawn? What type of response were encouraged? What consequences would such responses have for individual Christians/local churches/wider society/the world?

## THE WORLD TO WHICH THE STORY BELONGS

## Question 4

What do you know about the historical world in which this encounter took place? What was the political and economic situation in Palestine? What was the history of strained relationships between Judaeans, Galileans and Samaritans?

## Question 5

What do you know about the lives and experiences of women at the time? What was marriage like? How did unmarried or divorced women survive?

## LISTENING AGAIN AS IF FOR THE FIRST TIME

Put your previous experiences of the story aside and read or listen to the story again as if for the first time. Try to imagine yourself into the story as if one of the characters.

## Question 6

With whom did you identify? How did you experience events as if that character? How did you feel about things that happened or were said?

## Question 7

What did you learn about yourself/other characters/Jesus/the world/God? What responses might the experience call you (the character) to make?

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## Question 8

Jesus and the woman use water-related language to speak about other things. How does the imagery of water, springs and wells function in the following texts: Ps 36.7–9; Prov 5.15–18; 9.17–18; 10.11; 14.27; Song of Songs 4.12–15; Jer 2.13, 18–19; 17.13.

## Question 9

Metaphorical speech always has several possible meanings. It expects those listening to navigate layers of meanings and to understand what is being said at several levels. Does it worry you that, rather than speaking plainly, Jesus chose to communicate with the woman at the well through riddles, double-entendres and word games? Why?

## RESPONDING TO THE STORY AS DISCIPLES OF JESUS

## Question 10

Can you identify contemporary situations in which it would be unwise to speak plainly? How might people communicate indirectly yet effectively so that they get the point and understand each other's unspoken meaning?

## Question 11

What do you know about sex work in our world? What do you know about slavery? How is slavery or other forms of coerced labour involved in the products and services we regularly use?

## Question 12

Where and how are you located in the political, economic, social and religious structures and systems of our world? How might this influence the way you read and respond to this story?

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## Academic Questions

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### LISTEN AND REFLECT

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#### Question 1

Remember your previous encounters with this story. What have you taught/been taught about it? What aspects of the story were focused on? What aspects were skipped over?

#### Question 2

How was the story applied to our world? What lessons were drawn? What type of response were encouraged? What consequences would such responses have for individual Christians/local churches/wider society/the world?

### THE WORLD TO WHICH THE STORY BELONGS

#### Question 3

What do you know about the historical world in which this encounter took place? What was the political and economic situation in Palestine? What was the history of strained relationships between Judaeans, Galileans and Samaritans?

#### Question 4

What survival strategies could impoverished peasant families use when denied respectable livelihoods? What do you know about the lives and experiences of women at the time? What was marriage like? How did unmarried or divorced women survive?

### LISTENING AGAIN AS IF FOR THE FIRST TIME

Put your previous experiences of the story aside and read or listen to the story again as if for the first time. Try to imagine yourself into the story as if one of the characters.

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## Question 5

With whom did you identify? How did you experience events as if that character? How did you feel about things that happened or were said? What did you learn about yourself/other characters/Jesus/the world/God? What responses might the experience call you (the character) to make?

## Question 6

Metaphorical language is by its very nature fluid and polyvalent. Consider how the imagery of water, springs and wells functions in the following texts: Ps 36.7–9; Prov 5.15–18; 9.17–18; 10.11; 14.27; Song of Songs 4.12–15; Jer 2.13, 18–19; 17.13. Why have so few biblical scholars been willing to explore the gendered and sexual connotations of Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman? Why does it matter?

TOWARD A GROUNDED DISCIPLESHIP RESPONSE

## Question 7

Can you remember conversations that featured double and triple entendre to simultaneously communicate at more than one level? Would you have enjoyed these conversations had your life depended on both communicating and concealing or camouflaging your true meaning?

## Question 8

What do you know about sex work in our world? What do you know about slavery? How is slavery or other forms of coerced labour involved in the products and services we regularly use?

## Question 9

Where and how are you located in the political, economic, social and religious structures and systems of our world? How might this influence the way you read and respond to this story?