

## The True and The False: The Structure of John 4,16-26

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Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman is surely one of the best-known stories of John's Gospel, and one that commentators like to analyse in great detail. Several studies have shown the underlying structures of the pericope, the symbolism of the well and the water, the close ties to other stories within the same Gospel, and the allusions to the Hebrew Bible.

Amongst the latter are the allusions to the betrothal scenes in Gen 24; 29 and Exod 2. Indeed, John 4,1-42 may be said to belong to the genre of the betrothal scene,<sup>1</sup> as it shares several elements with the betrothal narratives in the Hebrew Bible:<sup>2</sup> The male protagonist is at a well (Gen 24,11; 29,2; Exod 2,15; John 4,6) in a foreign place (Gen 24,10; 29,1; Exod 2,15; John 4,4). The female protagonist comes to draw water (Gen 24,15; 29,6.9; Exod 2,16; John 4,7), perhaps at an unusual hour (Gen 29,7f; John 4,6). The man may ask for something to drink (Gen 24,14; John 4,7), but may himself reverse the situation by giving the woman to drink (Exod 2,17; John 4,10-15). The man reveals his identity (Gen 24,34; 29,12; John 4,26), and the woman runs off to tell others of the meeting (Gen 24,28; 29,12; Exod 2,18f; John 4,28f). The man refuses to eat (Gen 24,33; John 4,32), before or after the others have come out to meet him (Gen 24,29; 29,13; John 4,30.40); however, he accepts the invitation to stay (Gen 24,31f; 29,14; Exod 2,20f; John 4,40).

Not only do the elements within the pericope point to the betrothal genre, but also the external framework speaks about marriage. The text immediately preceding ours speaks of Christ as the bridegroom (John 3,28f),<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As do Carmichael, *Marriage*; Bligh, *Jesus*; cf. also Léon-Dufour, *Lecture* 347.363-364; McPolin, *John* 75; Brown, *Gospel* 170; Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 459-460. Amongst those against such a position are Lee, *Narratives* 67; Olsson, *Structure*, especially 172 footnote 58. I have unfortunately not been able to consult Day, *Woman*.

<sup>2</sup> Alter, however, identifies only four elements belonging to the scene-type of the betrothal narrative in the Hebrew Bible; Alter, *Art* 51-62.

<sup>3</sup> See Carmichael, *Marriage* 332-335, who attaches great importance to the preceding pericope on John the Baptist; cf. Bligh, *Jesus* 332. Also other texts speak of Jesus as the bridegroom (e.g. 2Cor 11,2; Rev 21,2; see also Eph 5,21-32), and according to the Synoptics Jesus even employed this image about himself in terms of wedding-parables (Matt 22,1-14; 25,1-13; Mark 2,19-20; Luke 5,34-35); these are not found in John. However, this Gospel often contains material

and the text following reminds us that Cana is the place where Jesus changed water into wine (4,46), referring to the wedding-feast (2,1-11).

I would like to point out a third element which indicates that betrothal underlies the pericope. This element, which so far seems to have been ignored by commentators, is that of the structure of verses 16-26.

I would suggest that these verses form a concentric structure, which may be outlined thus:

A verses 16-18: Introduction: The five (+ one)<sup>4</sup> husbands of the woman

B verse 19: Profession of Jesus as prophet

C verse 20: Worship on Mt. Gerizim or in Jerusalem

D verse 21: The hour

E verse 22: Knowing; salvation is from the Jews

D' verse 23a: The hour

C' verses 23b-24: Worship in spirit and truth

B' verse 25: The Messiah will proclaim all things [as do prophets]

A' verse 26: Conclusion: Jesus proclaims he is the Christ, pronouncing  $\epsilon\gamma\omega\ \epsilon\iota\mu\iota$ .

The importance in this context lies on the “outer” statements, namely those marked A and A' above. If the concentric structure is real, these two must correspond to each other; but how?

The five husbands are commonly understood to refer to idols worshipped by the Samaritans, idolatry in general or syncretism.<sup>5</sup> Bligh is even more precise when he states that the five rather symbolise idolatrous cults, whereas the sixth man, who is not a husband, may symbolise a syncretism between Yahwism and paganism.<sup>6</sup> This fits well with the following conversation on false and true worship.

Whereas false gods may be presented as husbands, so, in the Hebrew Bible, is Yahweh, the true God, presented in the image of a husband (Isa 54,5; 62,5; Jer 3,20; 31,32; Hos). Especially Hosea is noteworthy, with

found in the Synoptics in a reworked shape. I would suggest that this is also the case here; the Fourth Gospel does not contain any wedding-parable, but it does contain the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, shaped on meetings in texts in the Hebrew Scriptures, and framed by the wedding at Cana (2,1-11), or mention thereof (4,46), and specifically John the Baptist's proclamation of the Christ as the bridegroom (3,29).

<sup>4</sup> The one she has now is not her husband, though note that they are all designed by the Greek word  $\alpha\upsilon\eta\rho$  which may mean “man” or “husband.”

<sup>5</sup> Thus Barrett, Gospel 197; Brown, Gospel 171; Dodd, Interpretation 313-314.

<sup>6</sup> The five husbands correspond to seven “Samaritan” gods (imported by the Assyrians) named in 2Kings 17,30-31. Four of the seven gods occur in pairs, thus giving five cults; see Bligh, Jesus 336. Bligh also points out how Josephus, in Ant. Jud., IX, 288, simplifies the narrative of 2Kings by saying that five gods were imported.

Yahweh, the true husband, trying to convert Israel from the false husbands (בְּעַלִּים; cf. also Jer 2).<sup>7</sup>

Jesus is the “I am” of John 4,26 and the “I am” of the Hebrew Bible (LXX ἐγώ εἰμι). The “I am” of the Hebrew Bible is also the true husband; likewise, the “I am” of John 4,26 is the true husband. Hence it becomes clear that the correspondance of statements A and A’ above lies in the comparison between the Samaritan woman’s husbands and Jesus, the true husband.<sup>8</sup>

This gives us two conclusions: First, the concentric structure of John 4,16-26 provides additional evidence for John 4,1-42 being shaped as a betrothal narrative because it identifies Jesus as the true husband. Second, just as false husbands are used as an image of false gods in the discussion on true and false worship, so the true husband is an image of the true God. Jesus is not only God’s gift (4,10), a prophet (4,19), the Messiah called Christ (4,25.29) and the saviour of the world (4,42); he is also Godself.<sup>9</sup>

### Summary

Several commentators have pointed out that John 4,1-42, which recounts Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, may belong to the genre of betrothal scenes, as it shares elements with such scenes found in the Hebrew Bible. This note provides additional evidence in support of this by pointing out how the concentric structure of verses 16-26 identify Jesus as the true husband. This identification also implies that the text presents Jesus as the true God.

### Zusammenfassung<sup>10</sup>

Verschiedene Kommentatoren haben darauf hingewiesen, dass Joh. 4,1-42, die Begegnung Jesu mit der Samariterin am Brunnen, zu einer Gattung von Verlobungsszenen gehören könnte, wie man sie im Alten Testament findet, weil sie Elemente mit dort vorhandenen Szenen teilt. Dieser Hinweis wird zusätzlich belegt, in dem er sich auf die konzentrische Struktur der Verse 16-26 stützt, die Jesus als den wahren Ehemann identifizieren. Diese Identifizierung deutet auch an, dass der Text Jesus als den wahren Gott darstellt.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Carmichael, *Marriage* 338-340. Here he also makes the link between idolatry and thirsting, referring to Jer 2; 3.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also Léon-Dufour, *Lecture* 363-364, who states that Jesus replaces the Samaritan gods (though he does not identify the concentric structure).

<sup>9</sup> Though Jesus speaks of true worship of the Father, and not of himself (4,21.23).

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Doris Roth for her help in translating the abstract into German.

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