

## JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN (JN 4:1–42) IN AFRICA

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*The author reads the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1–42) in light of social ills afflicting African society today. She first highlights the rejection, prejudice, and isolation of the two main characters in their own contexts, and their contribution to John's account of how the woman leads her village to the "living water" of faith in Jesus. Finally she examines what John's Jesus of Galilee and the Samaritan woman have in common and might have to say to Africa today.*

A STUDY IN AFRICA of the Johannine Jesus and the Samaritan woman could take a number of directions. A reader response approach could match different aspects of the story with situations of marginalization and exploitation on the Continent.<sup>1</sup> Another approach could explore the specifically "feminist" dimensions and their implications for the church in Africa and beyond.<sup>2</sup> In my first major work on the episode, given the

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<sup>1</sup> Musa W. Dube takes this approach in her "Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1–42)," *Semeia* 75 (1996) 37–59; and in "John 4:1–42—The Five Husbands at the Well of Living Waters," in *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*, ed. Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W. Dube Shomanah (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001) 40–65.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Chris Ukachukwu Manus, "The Samaritan Woman (Jn 4:7ff): Reflections on Female Leadership and Nation Building in Africa," *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 2.1–2 (1987) 52–63; Justine Kahunga Mbwiti, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (John 4:1–42)," in "*Talitha qumi!*": *Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians, Trinity College, Legon-Accra, September 24–October 2, 1989*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Ibadan: Daystar, 1990) 63–75; Musa W. Dube, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Motswana Feminist Theological Reflection on Women and Social Transformation," *Boleswa Occasional Papers on Theology and Religion* 1.4 (1992) 5–9; and Grant LeMarquand, "Bibliography of the Bible in Africa," in *The Bible in Africa:*

dominance of the historical-critical method at the time, I contextualized my reading of the passage by relating it to the possible contexts of the Evangelist and his immediate audience.<sup>3</sup> Even that seemed a major departure from the beaten track.<sup>4</sup> Since then the situation has changed, and the scholarship is more open to other ways of reading the biblical text.<sup>5</sup>

This current issue of *Theological Studies* marks the 30th anniversary of Virgilio Elizondo's "groundbreaking dissertation, which addressed the significance of the Galilean Jesus for U.S. Latinos . . . and the 40th anniversary of the option for the poor of the Latin American Bishops at Medellín" (1968).<sup>6</sup> Such an event celebrating the Galilean Jesus and the option for the poor calls for yet another contextual approach. To better situate this study of Jesus and the Samaritan woman from an African perspective shaped by this double axis, my contribution invites Jesus and the woman to the Continent where they share certain elements with Africans—thus the title, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (Jn 4:1–42) in Africa."

The contours of the story are simple. Rejected in Judea, Jesus left for Galilee through Samaria, in obedience to the divine imperative of his mission. Sitting there exhausted at a well, he enters into dialogue with a Samaritan woman who has come to fetch water, and leads her to faith in him as her long-expected Messiah. She abandons her water pot, symbol of her daily and society-gendered chores, goes to the town, and invites her people to come and encounter Jesus and to discover him for themselves as

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*Translations, Trajectories, and Trends*, ed. Gerard O. West and Musa W. Dube (Boston: Brill, 2001) 633–800.

<sup>3</sup> Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1–42*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, series 2, 31 (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1988). The work encountered two major objections while it was still in the making: one was to the contextual approach adopted; the other and perhaps more serious one was to the assumption that John's Gospel had something to do with mission, understood mainly as outreach to unbelievers in the Third World (on this see *ibid.* 7–22). Treating the pericope in the African context was ruled out within that view. Robert Morgan (*Theological Book Review* 1.3 [1989] 13) faulted its lack of attention to the feminist dimensions of the episode.

<sup>4</sup> Okure, *Johannine Approach* xvi–vii.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., John S. Pobee and Barbel von Wartenberg-Potter, eds., *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 1986); Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001); Gerard O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in South African Context*, rev. ed. (1991; Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis, 1997). In their continuing seminars on contextual studies, the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas and the Society of Biblical Literature are also trying to incorporate these newer approaches as valid ways of reading biblical texts.

<sup>6</sup> From the editors' précis (July 31, 2007) describing this special issue of *Theological Studies*.

she had done. While she is gone, Jesus prepares his disciples to enter into the harvest of his work in Samaria, and to reap a fruit that would overcome their inherited prejudices on race, class, and gender. At the end of the encounter, Jesus, the disciples, the woman, and the Samaritans enter into a communion fellowship, transcending a complex variety of sociocultural, gender, and religious barriers that would otherwise keep them apart. Of their own accord, the Samaritans confess Jesus not simply as their expected Jewish Messiah, but as the “Savior of the world.”

The proposed invitation of Jesus and the Samaritan woman to Africa raises certain questions. Who are they in their own contexts before they take the trip? Under what circumstances will they visit Africa, a continent of over 52 countries, each with a multiplicity of cultures and languages, and of a size that cannot be traversed in a day? And what of the fact that both Samaria and Galilee, taken together, are far smaller in size and population than some of Africa’s largest cities? Whom would they meet? On what subjects would they dialogue? Are there situations in Africa with which they would readily identify? What Messianic expectations would Jesus address in the people of Africa so as to lead them to faith? Would they listen to the woman’s gospel invitation to come and see a person who told her all that she ever did, and would they consider him a possible Messiah on that basis? Would they call him the “Savior of the world,” not on the woman’s word, but after meeting him personally, as the Samaritans did? These are some questions that might guide my study. Interesting as they are, however, I will focus on the question most salient for this special issue of *Theological Studies*, namely, What do Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee and the Samaritan woman share in common from their own contexts with those they would likely meet in a “homecoming” visit to Africa?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Increasingly, African and African-American scholars are discovering biblical evidence that the Israelites were in fact Africans. The Pentateuch suggests that the Israelites spent more than 400 years in Africa from the time of Jacob/Israel, not counting the sojourns of Abraham and Joseph, who married the daughter of the priest of On. Moses was legally the son of Pharaoh’s daughter and completely African by upbringing (Acts 7:22) at a time when the Israelites did not yet worship YHWH, as witnessed by the incident of the golden calf. See David Tuesday Adamu, “The Place of Africa and Africans in the Old Testament and Its Environment” (Ph.D. dissertation, Baylor University, 1986); Adamu, “The Table of Nations Reconsidered in African Perspective (Genesis 19),” *Journal of African Religion and Philosophy* 11 (1993) 138–43; Adamu, *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Christian Universities, 1998); Teresa Okure, “Africans in the Bible: A Study in Hermeneutics,” a paper given at the International Congress on the Bible in Africa, Cairo, August 4–20, 1987, and at the Society of Biblical Literature’s seminar on the Bible in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, New Orleans, November 23–26, 1996.

The method will be narrative and intertextual. I will first situate Jesus and the woman in their context and then examine their encounter in Samaria before taking them to Africa where they will feel very much at home. The Gospel narrative sets the terms of their encounter with the African audience, helping them break through inherited and imposed sociocultural and religious barriers that tear Africans apart. These are barriers that Africans have internalized and imposed on one another: barriers that hinder them from knowing and receiving God's free and humanizing gift of community; barriers that keep them from meeting Jesus on their own terms as Savior of the world. The encounter also challenges the privileged who are equally enslaved to inherited racism and prejudice, which prevent them from seeking God in true worship, from receiving God's gift of living water, the Holy Spirit, and from confessing Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee as their unmerited, universal Messiah.

### JESUS OF NAZARETH IN GALILEE

Both Medellín and the culturally contextualized theology of Virgilio Elizondo highlight the significance of Jesus for the poor and marginalized today. Jesus of Nazareth was himself poor and marginalized, though, as God, he was rich (Phil 2:6–11; 2 Cor 8:9; Rom 11:33–36) and came to enrich all with the gift of unending life, feeding them with himself, God's life-giving bread from heaven (Jn 6:32–33, 58). Nathanael, a Galilean from Bethsaida, articulates the prevailing view when he asks ironically, "Can anything good come from Nazareth" (Jn 1:46)? Could the long-expected Messiah be from Nazareth? It is noteworthy that Jesus in Matthew's Gospel decries Bethsaida as one of the cities that would not repent, despite having witnessed his miracles, wallowing instead in pride and boasting (Mt 11:21–24). Nathanael, however, is able to transcend his prejudice against Nazarenes when he encounters Jesus in person (Jn 1:49), much as the Samaritans did later.

Though Jesus grows up in Nazareth and is popularly known as "Jesus of Nazareth,"<sup>8</sup> Matthew and Luke place his birth in Bethlehem of Judah, thereby burnishing his geographical and family credentials by linking him to the royal house and lineage of David (Mic 5:2–3; Mt 2:1–6; Lk 2:1–7). On the other hand, his designation at the time of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem as "the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee" directly challenges the traditional view that prophets do not arise from Galilee and justifies the turmoil it causes in the whole city (Mt 21:10–11). His mother Mary also lives in Nazareth, where angel Gabriel meets her (Luke 1:26). Her Magnificat (Lk 1:42–55) reflects an awareness of what tradition thinks

<sup>8</sup> See Mt 16:14; Mk 6:15; Lk 7:16:39; 24:19; and Jn 7:40, 52.

of her as a woman, and celebrates God's radical reversal of that view.<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps because the only biological parent of Jesus is a Nazarene that the narrative makes Jesus a Nazarene as well (or Nazorean [Mt 2:23]). In the postexilic era, to prevent mixed marriages by Jewish men, mothers, not fathers, determined the nationality of Jewish children.<sup>10</sup> Viewed from the mother's side, Jesus' Nazarene origin has rich historical and theological significance.

The prejudice against Jesus is not limited to Nathanael's low opinion of Galileans. His own relatives and neighbors in Nazareth do not think much of him. All four Gospels agree on this. The Synoptics report that Jesus, having overcome the temptations in the wilderness, sets out to proclaim the good news to the poor, but his own people reject him on the grounds that they know his parents and relatives (Mt 13:53–58; Mk 6:1–6; Lk 4:16–30). In Luke, Jesus' own people make the first attempt on his life (4:16–30).<sup>11</sup> In Mark, Jesus is pejoratively called "the son of Mary" (6:4). John moves the rejection closer to home when fellow Galileans mock his claim to be "the bread of life that came down from heaven" with the incredulous response, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" (6:41–42). Indeed, John adds that his own "brothers did not believe in him" (7:5) and urge him to go to Jerusalem and display himself, accusing him of hiding in Galilee where the ignorant could be easily fooled. On the other hand, later in the tradition, James, "the brother of the Lord," becomes a prominent disciple (Acts 15:13–21; Gal 1:18–19).

Galilee receives equal contempt from the Judeans, especially the authorities. Nicodemus cautions the Sanhedrin against condemning Jesus without first listening to him and finding out what he is doing (Jn 7:51), as required by the law (which Nicodemus does in Jn 3:1–21). They ask accusingly in reply, however, whether Nicodemus is a Galilean as well, and challenge him to "search" (with no indication of where to search!) and "you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee" (Jn 7:52). In other words, Galilee is excluded from the very possibility of ever producing a prophet, let alone the Messiah. Still, the leaders are not satisfied and go home disgruntled, unable

<sup>9</sup> On the Magnificat and its possible significance for African women, see Gertrud Wittenburg, "The Song of a Poor Woman: The Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55)," in *Women Hold Up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in South Africa*, ed. Denise Ekermann, Jonathan A. Draper, and Emma Mashini (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1991) 2–20.

<sup>10</sup> A typical example is Timothy whom Paul circumcised to be his traveling companion, because his mother was "a Jewish woman" (Acts 16:1–3).

<sup>11</sup> See my recent analysis of this episode: "Jesus in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30 and //s: An Index to the Question of Poverty in Africa," a paper presented at the biennial congress of Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes (PACE), Johannesburg, September 2007 (publication of the proceedings is in process).

to come to grips with this “Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee,” whose presence and deeds turn their perceptions of Galileans upside down. The man born blind later challenges them to revise their view of him on the basis of his deeds, but to no avail (Jn 9:30–34).

In John’s narrative, however, it is not the leaders’ rejection of the incontestable evidence of Jesus’ giving sight to the man born blind (something never heard of “since the world began” [9:32]) that confirms their hard-heartedness and prejudice; rather, it is the raising of Lazarus from the dead after four days (11:39), and the notion that “if we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him” (11:48). Again unable to deny the evidence, the leaders decide to get rid of him quickly, lest the people declare and install him as king, and the Romans remove them from their posts and “destroy the nation” (11:47–52; 12:19). In this drama, the Jewish leaders feel threatened by Jesus as a messiah because of his deeds—curing the blind, raising the dead, challenging them to reread the Mosaic Law in light of his teaching and deeds. By contrast, however, the ordinary people, whom the leaders denounce as accursed “rabble who know not the law” (7:49), are able to perceive God at work in him and respond positively according to their own messianic expectations (6:15; 12:12–13).

The pejorative views of Galilee running beneath this narrative go back to the time of the settlement. Joseph’s descendants (Ephraim and Manasseh, by his Egyptian wife, daughter of the priest of On [Gen 41:45]) and Leah (the nonbeloved wife of Jacob/Israel) are assigned to Galilee. In the long history of Israel, Galilee more than Judah is subject to foreign influence and occupation, sustaining the presence of heterogeneous cultural groups especially from the time of the Assyrian deportation and importation in 722 BCE (2 Kings 17). In the New Testament era, cities, fortresses, and garrisons dot Galilee, and the Roman Decapolis is nearby; Caesarea Philippi, Sepphoris, and the Jewish-friendly centurion of Capernaum (to name but a few) are all in Galilee. The Matthean designation of this region as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Mt 4:13–16) captures the multiethnic reputation of this region of Israel.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, the Gospels suggest that the experience of Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee is colored by prejudice and rejection. For his part, Jesus chooses to identify himself with this good-for-nothing place. For Paul, this decision contributes to his conclusion that “Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2:6–11).

<sup>12</sup> This is not the place to go into this matter in detail. For windows onto the political and sociocultural life in Hellenistic and Roman Galilee see, e.g., Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament*, 2nd corr. ed. (New York: SCM, 1987); Sean Freyne, *Galilee, from Alexander the Great to Hadrian, 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E.: A Study of Second Temple Judaism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University, 1980).

In the end, rejected and abandoned, he redeems all humanity and restores us to our God-given status as children of God (Rom 8:14–17). The mission of Jesus to promote this status is reflected in his approach to the Samaritan woman, which I will now examine.

### THE SAMARITAN WOMAN IN HER CONTEXT

Like Jesus of Nazareth, the Samaritan woman belongs to a people who are subject to inherited social prejudice because of their origin, and, in the case of the woman, simply because she is a woman. John's Gospel states cryptically that Jews "do not share things in common with Samaritans" (4:9c), which suggests that their lives were intertwined yet separated. Eating and drinking sustains life, and to eat and drink with a person—as Jesus was proposing to do here—would be to identify or be in solidarity with that person. The narrative, however, highlights the animosity between Jews and Samaritans, which Hebrew Scripture (2 Kings 17) dates back to the settlement of five nations in Samaria after the deportation of leading Israelites by Sargon II, the king of Assyria. The mutual hatred of Jews and Samaritans intensified in the postexilic period when Zerubabel refused to allow the Samaritans to help rebuild the Temple (Ezra 4). So around 300 BCE the Samaritans built their own shrine on Mount Gerizim as a rival to the Temple in Jerusalem; John Hyrcanus destroyed the shrine ca. 128 BCE. In the New Testament era, Flavius Josephus reports a desecration of the Temple in Jerusalem by Samaritans (*Antiquities* 18.29–30). And Ben Sira sums up Jewish hatred and prejudice against Samaritans when he writes, "Two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people: Those who live in Seir and the Philistines, the foolish people that live in Shechem" (Sir 50:25–26). The rabbis saw Samaritan women as menstruous from birth, that is, perpetually unclean and consequently a permanent source of uncleanness for their community.<sup>13</sup> The Jewish leaders in John's Gospel perceive Samaritans as demon-possessed, and Jesus as one of them (8:48). Racial prejudice and hatred could not go any further.

On the home front, the Samaritan woman is described as five times married and now living with someone who is not her husband (4:17–18). Rabbinic laws allowed marriage a maximum of three times. Critics conclude from this that the woman in the story leads a loose moral life, though the text does not explicitly say this. It is enough that she is a woman and a Samaritan. In this society the five husbands could have been permitted by levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10), while the sixth might have refused to

<sup>13</sup> See the extensive study on this in Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1922–1961) 1:540–560, especially on the rules of purity (540–41); food laws (541–42), and worship (542–44); and my discussion in *Johannine Approach* 96.

marry her.<sup>14</sup> Given the highly gendered moral standards of the time, however, it is unlikely that such a woman could have persuaded the man to live with her on her own initiative (assuming they were living together). Whatever the case, in the narrative world of John's Gospel the woman, due to her marital history, is likely an outcast in her own society. That she comes to draw from the well at about noon, the hottest part of the day when people did not normally fetch water, supports this impression. Nothing is said about the sixth man who is not her husband, though it is worth noting that in cases of sexual immorality, the woman is always at fault (see Jn 8:1–11).

Sociocultural prejudices against the Samaritan woman notwithstanding, she is not ignorant of her personal worth. She has traditions and parentage, which even the sneer of a Ben Sira or one-sided community norms cannot nullify. She traces her ancestry to Jacob/Israel, the founder of the nation. She reminds Jesus that Jacob gave them the well where they sit, and he drank from it with his descendants and their livestock (4:12). The Jewish reader might know that Joshua testifies that Joseph's bones are buried in Shechem, and that the land was an inheritance of his descendants (Josh 24:32). In Luke-Acts, Stephen extends the ancestral connections of Shechem back to Abraham and the Patriarchs (Acts 7:16). Thus, the woman seems convinced that, despite inherited and competing claims for Gerizim and Jerusalem as the fitting place of worship, the Messiah ("God's Messiah") will put them right (4:25).

She is very much aware of the tense relationship between her people and the Jews, and the complications this implies for a Jewish man who would speak with a Samaritan woman (both "you a Jew" and "me a Samaritan woman" in 4:9 are in emphatic positions); indeed, she expresses surprise that Jesus seems not to know this. Yet she has her feet firmly on the ground and her wits about her, and is able to reason and reach her own conclusions in her dialogue with Jesus. Contrary to critics who view her character as dependent on the men from her town to tell her that Jesus is the Messiah, she is not afraid to engage in conversation with an inimical Jewish male.<sup>15</sup> Once persuaded that Jesus is the Messiah, she at once runs to the town and convinces the people to come meet Jesus for themselves. Her action looks

<sup>14</sup> For a similar view see Gail R. O'Day, "John," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 295–96.

<sup>15</sup> On the woman's sagacity in the dialogue with Jesus, see Okure, *Johannine Approach* 108–31, where I have also argued that the woman's question to her people, "Can he be the Christ?" parallels Jesus' own method: as he roused her curiosity so she roused her people's curiosity, leading them to reach their own personal decision about him. See also Teresa Okure, "John," in *The International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Resource for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. William Farmer et al. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1998) 1438–1505.



forward to that of Mary of Magdala, who runs to call Peter and the beloved disciple to come and see the empty tomb for themselves, an action that engenders the disciples' belief (20:1–10). In short, the woman lives and is sustained by hope, which helps her transcend and overcome her sociocultural and religious predicaments. This disposition makes her ripe for Jesus' self-revelation to her as "the Messiah" (4:26). Similarly, Mary of Magdala's love for Jesus helps her to look beyond death, making her an apt bearer of the resurrection message, the disciple to the disciples (20:17).

### WHAT JESUS AND THE WOMAN HAVE IN COMMON

These brief analyses of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in their different contexts have revealed that they share the experience of rejection, prejudice, and isolation. Jesus is rejected in Judea by his own people and goes, either by necessity or as part of his divine mission, to Samaria (4:4) where he finds a hearing and hospitality. The woman, living on the fringe of her society, goes to the well as part of her daily assigned chores and is welcomed by Jesus and placed at the center of his missionary efforts there. For Jesus, not only is society averse to his speaking in public with the woman (rabbinic law forbade a man to speak in public to a woman even if she were his own wife). The Evangelist also intimates that the absence of the disciples (who went to buy food) is a liberating opportunity for Jesus to engage the woman in conversation (4:8). The disciples confirm this impression when they return and are dumbfounded to see Jesus speaking with a woman (4:27). They are amazed not so much because Jesus is speaking with a Samaritan, but because he is speaking with a woman (4:27). Yet Jesus' divine mission is not subject to and cannot be hindered by such considerations. While the woman is leading her townspeople to encounter Jesus for themselves, he attends to the disciples, helping them overcome their learned aversion to public contact with women and, more widely, with Samaritans by explaining to them their part in his mission there.

Through his dialogue with the woman, Jesus gradually leads her to transcend the barriers of prejudice and the stigmas of racism and sexism, and to know and accept God's free gift in himself, who offers to all who believe in him salvation, "living water," and the Holy Spirit (4:7–10; 7:37–39). In the scheme of values portrayed in this pericope, human traditions of worship cede place to God's action in the individual's life. It is no longer a question of worshippers seeking God, but of God seeking people who will worship him in the way God wants, "in spirit and in truth" (4:24). Such worshippers surrender their lives to God, making God the organizing principle of their lives and receiving the salvation that comes with the divinizing gift of the Holy Spirit freely given to all who follow Jesus (1:12–13). This worship, neither in Jerusalem nor on the Gerizim mountain, transcends race, class,

and gender (Gal 3:28). Receiving this message, the woman is freed from the sociocultural shackles that bind her (see Gal 5:1–2) and is able to lead her own townspeople to the same freedom.

The consistent New Testament message embodied in this narrative, which we seem to have lost sight of over the centuries, is that God does the seeking and saving of humans, not the reverse. We can trace this theme back to the Fall and the protevangelium of Genesis (3:15) where God indicates that the trajectory of salvation will run through the seed of the woman. What human beings must do is allow themselves to be sought and found by God,<sup>16</sup> and open themselves to God's free and unconditional gift of salvation and redemption. In this divine enterprise no human being has the advantage over another, since all may receive this gift; God's gift is not based on partiality or on any human considerations. The Samaritans demonstrate the truth of this statement by exercising their freedom and God-given right to recognize and proclaim Jesus as the Savior of the world (4:42).

### JESUS AND THE WOMAN VISIT AFRICA

Before conducting Jesus and the Samaritan woman to Africa, I will sketch the sociocultural reality that they will encounter, and with which they will readily identify. The encounter in Samaria takes place at a well in the course of Jesus' tiring journey from Judea to Galilee. As was said earlier, Africa is a vast continent of some 52 countries, each with its multiplicity of languages, cultures, and practices. By size and population, all of Palestine could fit into one large African city, such as Lagos in Nigeria, with over twelve million inhabitants. Where, then, might Jesus and the woman travel, and whom would they meet? Would they journey to South Africa or Zimbabwe with their postapartheid problems? to one of the many African countries with ethnic conflicts? or would they visit the boardrooms of global power where Africa, even at home, remains marginalized? They could visit the slums of Nairobi where millions of people are crowded into a kind of West Bank refugee situation in their own country; or Jesus could simply look around the airports where women and children are being smuggled out for trafficking, prostitution, and cheap labor overseas. Were they to visit the churches, Jesus would hear, perhaps to his surprise, that he had decreed that women are to be seen not heard; that

<sup>16</sup> I made a similar discovery with regard to sacrifice in Hebrews: while human beings offer sacrifice to God to obtain favors or to appease God, in the optic of this letter, God is the one who sacrifices himself in the person of his Son to bring (or, in Pauline terms, to reconcile [2 Cor 5:18–19]) humans to the divine self. Teresa Okure, "Hebrews: Sacrifice in an African Perspective," in *Global Bible Commentary*, ed. Daniel Patte and assoc. eds., Teresa Okure et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004) 535–38.

their role is to labor cleaning the church and then disappear into the background when the liturgical functions begin; that they are called to teach seminarians the “sacred” disciplines and then to become their pupils when the latter are ordained because Jesus was a male.

Interesting questions emerge from this picture, well worth pursuing, though not here. Instead I will focus on the realities of prejudice and rejection that Africans experience from the world community on the basis of their God-given color, and which we unfortunately assimilate and apply to one another. Jesus and the Samaritan woman would encounter and readily identify with this prejudice. Africa is richly blessed by God in human, land, animal, mineral, and other natural resources. Africans helped build and continue to build the economy of the West, in the past through slave labor, and today through the “brain drain” of intellectuals and professionals in all fields, a practice akin to what Assyria did to Samaria and other conquered peoples in ancient times. Africa’s resources have been looted and exploited by colonial masters and would-be messiahs, in the past as well as in the present. For centuries Western countries have carted out the wealth of Africa, and now the Chinese and the Indians are following suit under the guise of helping Africa develop. Scholars are also beginning to include new messianic figures, or “husbands” as Musa Dube tags them,<sup>17</sup> in their studies of colonialism in Africa.

Many Africans believe that the decades of economic aid given to Africa have ironically weakened their economies, like the autoimmune disease brought on by HIV/AIDS, which attacks not just the economy but the very life and survival of the nation.<sup>18</sup> On the global scene, both in the church and in society, Africans have only to appear and their color disqualifies them—“Can anything good come from Africa?” Discriminations based on sex and class, though not peculiar to Africans, take a distinctive twist where Africans are concerned. These discriminations are both internal and external. Fortunately these attitudes are gradually changing. The recent election of Barack Obama as president of the United States is a significant example. This history-making event is a realization of the dream of Martin Luther King Jr. and all well-meaning Americans (black, colored, or white). Two successive secretaries of state in the administration of George W. Bush, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, have been African Americans. Kofi Annan, an illustrious son of Africa, was secretary

<sup>17</sup> See n. 1 above and my “Impoverished by Wealth: Mama Africa and Her Experience of Poverty,” Pope Paul VI Annual Lecture, CAFOD, London, November 10, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> The Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) devoted its 16th Theology Week to the topic; see Teresa Okure, “Africa and HIV/AIDS: The Real Issues,” in *The Church and HIV/AIDS in the West African Context*, ed. Ferdinand Nwaigbo et al. (Port Harcourt: CIWA) 66–94.

general of the United Nations for two consecutive terms, and Francis Cardinal Arinze of Nigeria was a possible papal candidate in the last election. But racial prejudice is by no means gone. One recalls the breathless coverage in the Western press of the Williams sisters, Serena and Venus, as though their debut in the world of tennis was a crime of trespass, where blacks had no right to intrude. Here too, the press grudgingly changed its mind, thanks to the sisters' sustained excellence.

Here in Africa, Jesus and the woman would discover that they too would be subjected to all kinds of racial, ethnic, class, and gendered prejudice. Arguably this multifaceted prejudice is one of the most debilitating forces impeding development on the Continent. Rwanda, Burundi, Darfur, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, even Nigeria with its "son of the soil" syndrome, all suffer from the debilitating effects of ethnic prejudice largely inherited from the legacy of "divide and rule" promoted by the colonial and neocolonial masters, and internalized by Africans. Like Jesus in Nazareth, Africans are rejected by their own neighbors, their talents ignored because people know their parents. "Is this not the son or daughter of . . . ? Did I not teach him or her in primary school? Who does s/he think s/he is? Where did s/he get this knowledge? After all, she is only a woman!" So many Africans will not believe in their own people. Worse still, some try to kill them—and they succeed as with Jesus in Jerusalem—because they feel such talented daughters and sons threaten their political or religious position.

While these reflections could continue, my point is that prejudice in all its forms kills and destroys the opportunities and talents God gives to individuals and communities in Africa and around the globe to improve themselves and to promote their growth in all spheres of life. It is self-defeating to reject those talents or to dismiss people on the basis of race, color, or gender. No human being, male or female, black, colored, or white, gives life to themselves, or has any say over the circumstances in which they come into existence. Life in all its ontological and sociocultural circumstances is a pure gift to every human being. Awareness of this truth is freeing and should lead all people to respect others equally. The dialogue of Jesus with the disciples on their mission (4:35–38) to complete the work of God that he has begun (4:31–34) highlights this point. Theirs is essentially a harvesting mission (as with all disciples), a harvesting of the fruit that Jesus and the Father have sown (4:38).<sup>19</sup>

The fulcrum, then, of the entire episode between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is her discovery of who Jesus is, of his true identity, which constitutes "God's gift" given freely to her and to all who accept this truth (4:10). This exchange constitutes the foundational text on mission in John's

<sup>19</sup> See Okure, *Johannine Approach* 136–88.

Gospel, embodying the proper response to its message that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:16; see also 1:12–13). All who are able to go beyond ethnic and religious prejudice to encounter the true identity of Jesus are empowered to truly become children of God, a gift offered on God’s own terms, not on the basis of human considerations.<sup>20</sup>

### JESUS, THE WOMAN, THE SAMARITANS, AFRICANS, AND ALL JESUS’ DISCIPLES

This brings me to the final part of my study, the encounter and dialogue between Jesus, the Samaritan woman, his immediate disciples, Africans, and disciples of Jesus the world over. The contours of this imaginative meeting are taken from the encounters described in the Gospel. How does Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world, elicit transformative responses from the woman, the Samaritans, and his disciples, and what might these events tell us about future encounters with Africans and other disciples around the globe—sheep who do not belong to his immediate fold, but whom he wishes to bring into the one flock under his shepherding (10:16)?

Jesus’ proclamation of God’s good news to the poor has two essential components that free their voices and elicit a personal, liberating option for God’s free gift of salvation: the first is Jesus’ humble self-emptying attitude; the second is his respect for dialogue partners as persons with concerns deserving full attention. Much has been written about the self-emptying of Jesus and its role as a model for Christians, especially consecrated persons. Yet one cannot empty a self that one does not possess. Self-emptying makes sense in the context of mission where the missionary voluntarily “decreases” so that the other may “increase” and have life to the full (Jn 3:30; 10:10). This is the rationale for Jesus’ self-emptying: to make room in himself for humanity, thereby uniting persons with God. Philippians 2:6–11 underscores this notion with its claim that “Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man.” In John’s pericope Jesus is described as “tired from his journey,” so he sits down at the well and, at the approach of the Samaritan woman, asks her for a drink, though he himself has a gift to give that cannot be measured in human terms.<sup>21</sup> This approach (in which he “stoops to conquer”) gives the woman the advantage: she is a

<sup>20</sup> On the foundational character of 3:16, see *ibid.* 5–6, esp. n. 10.

<sup>21</sup> See my analysis of the dynamics of interaction in *ibid.* 91–131; and “John” 1438–1502, esp. 1467–68; and Diarmund McGann, *Journeying within Transcendence: The Gospel of John through a Jungian Perspective* (London: Collins, 1989) 52–60, esp. 53–54.

daughter of the soil, with a bucket to draw from a deep well of long-standing ancestral history.

Once he begins the dialogue, the woman takes the lead, and at each point Jesus uses her concerns (of water-fetching, marital life, and the right place to worship) to reveal to her his true identity and convey to her the gift he offers. With the disciples, Jesus uses their concern for food. Water and food are indispensable for life; they thus become fundamental symbols of Jesus' life-giving mission. Second, what Jesus offers is truly a gift. Once given, it becomes the property of the receiver ("living water within the person welling up to eternal life") (4:14). The gift is not dependent on the receiver's superior status, good will, or benevolence. All receive the same gift and on equal terms because God, the giver, makes no distinction between persons in this regard (Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6; Acts 10:34; 1 Pet 1:17). This manner of giving truly liberates the receiver (see Rom 5:1–2) and imparts enabling power to be and to act as a full human being destined for the fullness of life (10:10).

The woman's excitement over her personal discovery of Jesus moves the Samaritans (themselves an estranged and outcast people) to look beyond traditional practices whereby women do not lead men (Sir 9:1–9) and accompany her to meet Jesus "on account of the woman's word" (4:30). Later, setting aside the lack of communion fellowship between them and the Jews ("for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" [4:9c]), they invite him to their town. Jesus graciously accepts and stays there two days, the maximum allowed by early church practice for a missionary in any given place.<sup>22</sup> Jesus' humble acceptance of their invitation leads the Samaritans to confess him as the Savior of the world, not only because of the woman's word (4:30), but also because they have seen and heard him for themselves (4:42). If Jesus can be this gracious to Samaritans, whom his fellow Jews treat not as a people but as dogs, then they conclude he must be "the Savior of the world."

The passage says nothing about the response of the disciples (4:31–38). Perhaps a reply is unnecessary. The narrative indicates what the response is or should be. Beyond the Samaritan woman and her people, the Evangelist wants to lead his own generation of disciples to embrace both the content and methods of the mission of Jesus.<sup>23</sup> This is where the church must pay heed in order to be relevant in Africa and elsewhere today.

Like his visit to Samaria, a visit from Jesus would challenge Africans to take a number of steps. First, his visit would call us to become aware of and to accept God's gift of eternal life and salvation, which is uniquely ours,

<sup>22</sup> See *Didache* 11:4–5; and J. Ramsey Michaels, "The Itinerant Jesus and His Home Town," in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (Boston: Brill, 1999) 177–93, esp. 190–91.

<sup>23</sup> See Okure, *Johannine Approach* 129–31, 174–75, 197–98, where I have developed this point.

regardless of who may have brought it. Second, he would invite us to get to know him personally and to open the reality of our lives intimately to him. Third, this knowledge would challenge us to articulate belief in Jesus based on our own experiences of him in the concrete settings of our real lives. This is the task of inculturation to which African and universal church leaders continue to pay lip-service, but which the Second Vatican Council over 40 years ago deemed indispensable when it said the proclamation of the gospel must take into substantial consideration people's own cultures (*Gaudium et spes* no. 22). Fourth, African church leaders and those to whom they proclaim the gospel must stand as equal harvesters of the work of salvation, reaping what was sown by God alone in and through Jesus (4:34; 17:4). Fifth, his visit would call women in Africa to recognize and claim the christological grounds for their right to participate along with men in all aspects of the church's life.

On a broader scale, the African encounter with Jesus would no doubt challenge the male clerical church to be open to and let go of their scandal at "what Jesus wants with woman." The Fourth Gospel seems to emphasize the importance of women in the story of Jesus. He calls his mother "woman" (2:4), and the text tells us "the mother of Jesus" not only gives him birth but also mothers the launch of his missionary career and his revelatory *alpha* sign (*archēn tōn semeiōn*, 2:11). She accompanies him throughout his life to its completion in the *omega* sign of his death and resurrection, where she receives the mission to mother his newborn child, the church (19:25–26, 30) into full maturity (Acts 1:14). The Samaritan woman is instrumental in effecting the conversion of her townspeople and, by implication, the disciples who would have accompanied Jesus into the town for the two-day stay, despite their mutual animosity with its inhabitants. Martha first articulates the confession that is the entire aim and purpose of the Gospel: that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world" (11:27; 20:31). Mary of Bethany performs the last liturgical rites for Jesus, "the lamb of God," by anointing him for burial (12:7; see 14:8). And Mary of Magdala loves and follows Jesus beyond death (20:1–2, 11–18), receiving from him the commission to proclaim the resurrection message that all believers are henceforth brothers and sisters, children of the same God, who is father/mother of us all (20:17). If the church in Africa today wants to participate in what God and Jesus want with women for the redemption and transformation of humanity, both genders will need to revisit long-held derogatory attitudes toward women, and learn to celebrate the gifts that God gives to them for their good as persons, and for the good of all.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The attitude of the hierarchical church, which continues to legislate for the exclusion and silencing of women or gives them only token considerations that are

Furthermore, the visit would challenge all disciples to eschew traditions of racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism that sicken Christian life, infecting its victims and rendering them incapable of recognizing who Jesus really is, especially in his brothers and sisters (Mt 25:40, 45). His presence would reveal in full God's gift of salvation that beckons all Africans to reconciliation, drawing us to cross boundaries (sociocultural, religious, and political) in forming communion fellowship with the Trinity and all believers (1 Jn 1:1–4). Jesus would challenge the church in Africa and elsewhere to look to what the Gospels tell us of Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee in searching for solutions in ecclesiology (who is or is not church), ecumenism (who has the last word concerning the right place to worship, how, and when), missiology (who should evangelize whom, where, and how), and dialogue (a readiness to rethink traditional practices, positions, and views through a genuine and respectful exchange that leads to insights inspired by the example of Jesus). All this is possible when our way of being church is rooted in what God does and will continue to do in individuals and communities, irrespective of who they are or where they come from.

### TOWARD A CONCLUSION

This study of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, then, has surfaced their shared experiences of prejudice, racism, and sexism flowing from the social norms of their societies. Jesus reaches beyond these prejudices, however, leading the woman, the Samaritans, and his own disciples to do the same. Unfortunately, contemporary discourse on the option for the poor has paid little attention to the role of inherited and ingrained prejudices in regard to Africans, though changes are taking place slowly. Second, the discourse on the option for the poor tends to focus on economic issues as evidenced even by the expression "option for the poor," which should be understood to include marginated women, allowing them to participate with an empowered voice.

In the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, however, Jesus does not simply opt for the poor, but rather identifies himself as poor so as to make all rich (Jn 10:7–18; 2 Cor 8:9). His option to identify himself as poor makes Jesus accessible to all and sundry, helping them to feel and know they are his equal as human, and at times perhaps his superior, as we saw in the dialogue with the Samaritan woman. John's narrative presents Jesus'

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subject to the "sensitivity of the faithful" in any local church, is antigospel and anti-*Christos*. It is remarkable that in the commentary on "John in an Orthodox perspective" by Petros Vassiliades (*International Bible Commentary*, 412–18) none of the passages on women seem to be relevant to this Orthodox perspective; so too the commentary of Kyung-mi Park, "John," *International Bible Commentary* 401–11.



association with the poor as a deliberate choice, which enables Jesus' dialogue partners to become aware of, claim, and celebrate their own God-given dignity, as do the Samaritan woman and her people (see *Gaudium et spes* no. 26). Jesus respects and works within people's own concerns in leading them to where his Father wants them to be. He eschews the dispute over competing claims and systems of nationality and worship, leading them instead to focus on God's action in their lives and in the world, and to see worship as the celebration of what God does in believers and wants to do in all God's children everywhere.

In reality, contemporary disciples of Jesus do not have to give the poor a voice or be their voice, because God has already given each one a voice in their own right and on God's own terms. By engaging the woman in respectful conversation as an equal partner (traditions and taboos to the contrary notwithstanding), Jesus gives the woman the opportunity to use her God-given voice, thus liberating the great potential within her. The abiding challenge for those who feel that theirs is the only voice worth hearing, or who have encroached upon the voice-space of others in church and society, is to retreat to their own space and to listen to those they previously thought had no right to speak. Both Vatican II and John Paul II say that promoting the dignity of "the human being" is the proper route to empower the poor and evangelize the rich. Jesus takes this route first by becoming a human being (1:14; Heb 4:15); and second, in his manner of proclaiming the good news to the poor—which includes the spiritually poor, since God's general amnesty excludes none (Lk 4:18–19).

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman reveals that when the Good News is heard and received, individuals discover living water welling up from within that promotes life in its fullness. Satisfaction with this way of living turns committed Christians away from the accumulation of wealth that impoverishes others, and from calculating their worth as human beings by the size of their bank accounts. I have written elsewhere about the corresponding need for a "salvific option for the rich," adopting the same respectful approach toward them as Jesus adopts toward Zacchaeus.<sup>25</sup> In Luke's description, Zacchaeus is "a chief tax collector and rich" (19:2b), but he is moved in response to his encounter with Jesus to redress the fraud he practiced and the impoverishment he perpetrated (19:8). Jesus, who notes that "the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost," declares in response, "Today salvation has come to this house," adding that Zacchaeus "is also is a son of Abraham" (19:9).

<sup>25</sup> Teresa Okure, "Salvific Option for the Rich: A Gospel Imperative for Mission in the Twenty-First Century," Third Annual Mission Lecture of the Holy Cross Mission Center, Notre Dame, Ind., February 18, 2007.

In the last analysis, the poor offer a special grace to the rich, but not because they need the surplus wealth of the rich. The poor call the rich to become aware of their own God-given status as children of God, whose primary identity and worth is not measured by bank accounts, shares of stock, or whether they belong to the G8, G15, or G20 groups of wealthy nations. They call the rich to the realization that it is unbecoming of them as human beings and children of God to serve, pursue, and be pursued by money/Mammon (Jas 2:1–13; 5:1–5). This approach to the option for the poor (coupled with salvific option for the rich) also helps ensure that the poor will not simply jump onto the bandwagon of complacent blindness if they too become rich and, like the fool in Psalm 14:1, feel they have no need of God.

Applying to Africa this discourse on the graces that the poor offer the rich, I have argued elsewhere that the martyrdom of Africa is hope for a new humanity. The innocent suffering of Africa is like the blood of martyrs that soaks, waters, and transforms the entire earth, including the lives of the guilty.<sup>26</sup> If we keep this transforming power in mind, Jesus' successful dialogue with the Samaritan woman, her people, his disciples, and with Africans and the global community will bear lasting fruit, for the living water that Jesus gives has become in us "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:14c), where both rich and poor can come to drink and rejoice together eternally in God's all-inclusive company. Nurtured and refreshed by this living water, we are empowered to begin living this way here on earth, which Jesus teaches us is possible as we pray each day in the Lord's Prayer to the one Father and Mother of us all.

<sup>26</sup> Teresa Okure, "Africa, A Martyred Continent: Seed of a New Humanity," in *Rethinking Martyrdom*, Concilium 2003/1, ed. Teresa Okure, Jon Sobrino, and Félix Wilfred (London: SCM, 2003) 38–46.