

John 4:1–42—Woman at the Well

Edmond Rostand (1868–1918) was a French poet and dramatist. He is associated with neoromanticism, and may be best known for his plays *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Les Romanesques* (which in 1960 was adapted into the long-running American musical, *The Fantasticks*).

Rostand also wrote and produced a play called *The Woman of Samaria*, based on the story in John 4:1–42. In this play, the woman is named Photine and her absent lover (the man she lives with after having had five husbands) is named Azriel.

Faye Pauli Whitaker offers this description of the nineteenth-century play:

Edmond Rostand's biblical drama *The Woman of Samaria*, first performed in 1897, reflects on the ancient significance of the well and the Jewish-Samaritan conflict as it opens with the phantoms of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The revolutionary rhetoric of a young Samaritan sustains the political concerns of the story. Photine, Rostand's heroine, approaches Christ at the well, singing songs of love from the Canticles. These songs continue through the play, though they gain symbolic meaning as her own awareness deepens from carnal to spiritual knowledge. Rostand makes little of Photine's moral history, though he does add the character of Azriel, Photine's sixth man, who is astonished when

this illiterate woman learns to expound Scripture like an ecstatic preacher. The play includes pageantry and Photine's exuberant singing. Even the otherwise crusty disciples eventually join in the celebration of love.¹

Text of John 4:1–42 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 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 have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to

him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

1. Faye Pauli Whitaker, “Woman at the Well,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 845.