

Mission for Reconciliation and Peaceful Unification
A Woman who Changed the Rise of Life-giving Water
(John 4:1-42)

Ms. CHOI Young Shil

(Professor, Sungkonghoe University, Seoul, Korea)

1. Mission in the 21st Century Context of Conflicts and Violence

During the last few centuries, we have experienced a bloody history in which many people have been sacrificed in the name of 'religion', 'God', or 'ideology.' The war between the USA and Iraq has been waged at least partly in the name of the 'Holy War' between 'God' and 'Allah.' Still more, various types of religious ideologies have been misused and even exploited in relation to many more conflicts among nations and races. On the other hand, in the case of the Korean Peninsula, socio-political ideological controversies which were manipulated for the imperialistic expansion of the Superpower countries have appeared to cause 'the Korean War' to break out in such a way as to divide the country, and still to threaten the peaceful coexistence of the Peninsula. In and for this context, we cannot but raise our question as to how we can participate in the mission for peaceful coexistence and unification. I will try to find out a biblical model through a woman, who appeared anonymous but was called contemptibly 'a Samaritan woman,' in the Gospel according to John (Ch. 4).

2. A Woman at the Edge of Spring

The lengthy passages of the Gospel of John 4:1-42 tells the story of 'a Samaritan woman' who was regarded as a real historical figure. The majority of male preachers are likely to concentrate on the verse which shows that Jesus said to her "you have had five husbands so far, and the man with whom you live now is not your husband." Accordingly, they emphasize that she was a woman who tried to find 'the trivial in vain', or who failed in her marital life, and all the more, who was finally corrupted to be a sinful prostitute. In this way, most of male preachers have focused on the repentance and conversion of this woman after her meeting with Jesus through his mysterious power of figuring out her past life of complexities and thirst. One of the Gospel songs whose title is 'like a woman at the edge of spring' describes exactly how most of us think of her:

Like a woman at the edge of spring, I tried to find the trivial in vain.
 At that time, the Lord tells me, "Come to my spring, and drink a water of life."
 Oh, Lord, fill up my glass. I will take my glass upward.
 Fill up my glass with the heavenly water, even till over-pouring.

However, who was really 'a Samaritan woman' described in the Gospel of John? Was

she merely a woman who, as the just-mentioned Gospel song assumes, was a sinful prostitute but repented through meeting with Jesus? How does the writer of the Gospel of John report on this Samaritan woman, and what does he mean by this? In order to answer these questions, we need to investigate into the relevant passages describing her thoroughly by means of historico-critical method, socio-historical method, feminist theological analysis, and so forth.

3. Samaria - Cursed Land of the Gentiles

At first, the writer reports in 4:1-7 on how Jesus and a Samaritan woman meet each other. Jesus who had preached in the Jerusalem area was moving there to Galilee because of the Pharisees, and had to pass by Samarita. During his trip, Jesus feels tired and thirsty, so he drops by spring in the town of Suga. In the meantime, a Samaritan woman comes to the spring to get some water out of it. Then, Jesus asks her to hand over water for his thirst. This is the beginning of the encounter between a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman. The writer reports on this moment by focusing on the fact that the place where they meet is 'the edge of Jacob's spring near the land inherited from Jacob to his son Joseph'(4:5-6).

Segem is located 65KM north from Jerusalem, and in that town Mt. Ebahl and Mt. Grishim are confronted with each other. According to Genesis story, 'the land inherited from Jacob to Joseph' is the very land which Abraham bought in Segem of Canaan for his posterity(cf. Gen 33:19). This is the place where Abraham locates altar for worship to Jehovah(Gen 12:6-7) for this first time, and where Jacob also did the same(Gen 33:18-20). Segem is a center of the religion and politics of the Israelites, where all the branches get together to worship God, to perform ritual for covenant renewal or for enthronement of kings. However, after the death of the King Solomon, there happens antagonistic conflict between Rehoboam and Jeroboam, thereby being divided into two parts(I Kings, 12:18, 25). Afterwards, the Jewish people were divided into two parts: the Southern Kingdom of Judea led by Rehoboam and the Northern Kingdom of Israel governed by Jeroboam, thereby fighting against each other through antagonism and slaughters.

The antagonism and hatred between the Southern Judea and the Northern Israel became stronger because Asure defeated the Northern Israel in 722 BC, designated that area as the Samaritan province of Asure, and furthermore, adopted a policy of racial amalgam between the Gooda people in Medhe and Persia and the people in the Samaritan area through cross-racial marriage. People of the Southern Judea called the Northern people 'Samaritan', and this was one of the severest curses at that time. In other words, 'Samaritan' was used to contempt cross-racial blood among Gentiles in comparison with the pure and clean blood of the Jewish people. The Jewish people claimed their ethnic purity, and mocked at the Samaritans even more contemptuously than gentile slaves. They excluded the Samaritans even building temples after coming back from the life of hostages at Babylon in 587 BC, and this caused the Samaritans to have more angers against the Jewish.

In the long run, the Northern Israel established their own temple at Mt. Grishim in Segem with a permission of the King Alexander in the 4th century BC. However, the Jewish regarded the temple of the Northern Israel as tainted and contaminated by

gentile religions, attacked that area, and finally destroyed it in 135-104 BC. The antagonism of the Samaritans against the Jewish people was maximized by this event of temple destruction.

The Gospel according to John was written in the very context mentioned above. The Jewish considered the Samaritans impure and condemned sinners so that they taught "not to go into any gentile or Samaritan towns"(Matt 10:5). The very words of this passage reported as of Jesus' own represented the Jewish teaching at that time. In response to this, the Samaritans hated the Jewish, and prohibited them to pass through the Samaritan areas. As a Jewish historian Josephus reported that the Samaritans killed the Jewish passing by the Samaritan areas and the Jewish revenged in return, Judea and Samaria were actually separated from each other at the time of Jesus.

The passages of 4:1-2 in John's Gospel assumes that Jesus goes into the Samaritan area not for the purpose of mission for it but simply for passing by in order to go to Galilee. However, we must ask why the writer of John's Gospel describes the place where Jesus and a Samaritan woman meet as 'the land Jacob inherited down to Joseph' instead of calling it simply Segem. Doesn't the writer intend to place stress on the fact that both people in northern and southern areas are posterities of the same ancestors? Definitely yes! 'The land Jacob inherited to Joseph' was the holy place where one race of Israel got together to worship their God, and 'the Jacob's spring' is still located there in the northern area. However, the Jewish looked down upon the very land as 'dirty' and 'cursed'. But a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman meet in the very land.

4. A Samaritan Woman Challenging A Jewish Man

The Gospel shows in 4:9-15 a special concentration on how a Samaritan woman responds to Jesus asking for drinking water. When following the concentration point of the Gospel, a Samaritan woman is not so much concerned with her own personal problems such as marital status. Rather, she is a woman who challenges Jesus, a Jewish man, with her deep sense of ethnicity.

Of course, a Samaritan woman handed over drinking water to Jesus, but she asked in response to Jesus's asking: "How come you as a Jewish man ask a Samaritan woman like me to give water?" As the verse 4:9 shows, the Jewish was prohibited from contact with any Samaritans because of the former's contempt of the latter. Furthermore, The Jewish men were taught that as for Samaritan women menstruation begins at the time of cradle so that they are extremely dirty and are likely to make other people also dirty and unjust. Accordingly, the question that a Samaritan woman asks to Jesus is the very question of challenging and protesting against the false ideology of racial segregation and sexual discrimination.

In response to such challenge, Jesus answers that "If you knew who the person asking for water is, you would ask for living water." However, she goes on to challenge again by asking "Are you a man who is greater than our forefather Jacob? He inherited this spring to us. Not only he and his children but also his herds drank water from this spring." Her challenge asks whether Jesus, as a man greater than

Jacob, can liberate the Samaritans including herself and solve the problem of thirst for free and genuine life. Such challenging question as raised by her represents her own sense of ethnicity and messianic hope. The verse 4:25 indicates that she is a woman who longs for the Messiah earnestly. For this reason, she does not reject Jesus who will give water of life in return; instead, she asks challengingly and vigorously: "Who are you? Aren't you a Jewish man who contempered the Samaritans with strong racial prejudices?"

In confrontation with such challenge, Jesus witnesses to his messiahship as the saviour of final judgment, who will give 'water welling up to eternal life' to those who feel thirsty: "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst." Listening to this, she stops asking; instead, she said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw"(4:15).

Obviously, a Samaritan woman's asking is in contradistinction to Nicodemus, a man of the Pharisees and ruler of the Sanhedrin Assembly. Though he was in a situation similar to her, he was only blamed for his misbehavior, when Jesus said to him, "How come you do not know this, although you are a teacher of Israel?" Unlike Nicodemus, however, she asks for living water vigorously, when she says: "If you are really a man who can give me and my people living water so that we may be liberated from suffering and thirst, give me that water now! Give that water not only to me, but also to my people, my children, and even to my cattle"(4:12).

5. A Woman Who Penetrates Everything of Jesus

In spite of such vigorous request, the scene in the Gospel is changed suddenly, since the following passages(4:16-19) seem to have focus on her past marriage life. However, closer scrutiny shows that it is not the case. For the major concern of the passages is not so much with how she has lived during her marriage life as with who Jesus is. In other words, this is a corollary to the question that she asked Jesus "Who are you?"

Let's take a look at the scene in more details. While Jesus does not give her what she asks, he said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here" instead. When the woman answers 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 he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly." At this point, we should not regard her merely as a prodigal woman who changed her husbands frequently. For in those times, women were not allowed to leave her husband. Only men can buy or sell women, give document of divorce to their wives through superficial legitimation and have other women for themselves. Under such circumstances of unfair system, Samaritan women were not able to get married in a legal sense. For this reason, those women could not but have contacts with many men for their own lives.

Because Jesus does not judge people according to flesh(John 8:15) and knows people what is in them(John 2:25), he does not define her as sinner nor condemns her. Rather, he tries to see into her who has had several husbands but has none now. "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands,

and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly"(4:17-18). In other words, Jesus himself pays special attention to the social situation in which Samaritan women are oppressed and despised by the existing patriarchal ideologies and prejudices of the Jewish men. At this very point, a Samaritan woman eventually opens herself and confesses: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet" (4:19).

The fact that the woman identifies Jesus as a 'prophet' shows the general consciousness of messiahship. For in John's Gospel Jesus is witnessed to in various christological terms, especially 'a prophet who informs people of the will and plan of God', like 'tahev', the messiah who Samaritans have long expected to come. Meanwhile, in contrast to this, the Jewish people rejected Jesus' messiahship by saying contemptuously that "search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee"(John 7:52).

However, the woman confesses her messianic hope in front of Jesus. And she begins to ask a series of question which she has long been concerned about. "Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship"(4:20). Of course, her words are not asking about religious worship merely, but rather about the dominating false ideologies of Jerusalem. As shown in Pentateuch, the Mt. Grishim in Segem was a place not only for worship but also for politics in the times of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and many prophets. But after the establishment of the Jerusalem Temple by the King David, and especially because of the division of the South and the North, people of the Southern Judea designated the Jerusalem Temple as the holy place from which they asserted salvation would come. Accordingly, they defined people worshipping in other places as sinners in conformity with their own Law. Thus, a Samaritan woman now points to the illegitimacy of the false Jewish ideologies of the Jerusalem Temple.

In response to this complaint, Jesus answers: "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father"(4:21); instead, "the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth"(4:23). In other words, what Jesus tries to emphasize is that God is spirit, and that people who worship God must do so in spirit and truth. In other words, he entirely rejects the Jewish ideologies which abuse religious worship as means of domination and discrimination. In this way, Jesus is described as the truth in contrast to the false consciousness of the Jews. For he clearly breaks out the false idea that "salvation is from the Jews"(4:22).

Then, to our astonishment, the woman says in the present tense, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things"(4:25). To this, Jesus responds immediately by saying "I who speak to you am he"(4:26). Finally, throughout the whole course of questioning and answering in a deep awareness of the conflict and division of nation and people, she comes to know all things 'now', which will happen at the end of the world. This is no other than the amazing fact that the Messiah of the Parousia who will recover from the division and oppression due to the false ideologies is standing before her in the human form.

6. A Woman who Sows the Seed of Blessing in the Cursed Land of Gentiles

So the woman leaves her water jar, and goes away into the city, and says to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"(4:29-30). Here the woman does not say to people in suspecting whether Jesus is really the Christ or not, as mistranslated and misinterpreted by many readers. Rather, as she says "Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did", she is asking people to come and see whether the man who she met is really the Christ or not.

The phrase "come and see" in the Gospel of John includes a clear intention to lead people to Jesus in flesh, and to proclaim that Jesus in flesh is the very Messiah of the end of the world. Just as Jesus sees through the woman in her existence, so the woman sees through Jesus who asks for water. So she leaves her water jar, and goes away into the city, and says to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did."

The verse 4:30 tells us that "they went out of the city and were coming to him." And the verse 4:39 affirms that many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." According to the Acts, the evangelist who proclaims the Gospel for the first time in the history of Samaria was Phillip, who was one of the seven deacons ordained by the twelve disciples (Acts 6:5), and it was Peter and John who baptized people in Samaria (Acts 8:1-5). But John's Gospel tells us that it was a Samaritan woman who met Jesus beside the well that brought the Gospel to Samaria first, and that thanks to her testimony many Samaritans came to believe Jesus.

The writer of John's Gospel has a clear intention to emphasize that the mission to Samaria began not by disciples or apostles but by a nameless Samaritan woman who suffered from oppression and discrimination. For this purpose, the writer inserted a story of Jesus' disciples returning from food market in the midst of the whole scene. Jesus said to his disciples, "Do you not say 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest"(4:35). And quoting the saying 'One sows and another reaps,' Jesus goes on to say to them, "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor; others have labored, and you have entered into their labor"(4:38).

Here 'one who sows' or 'one who labors' indicates neither Jesus nor his disciples. Jesus is rather one who sends people to reap, and his disciples are merely the ones who can enter into others' labor. According to the passages of 4:31-34, Jesus' disciples still did not know who Jesus was nor what he was doing. They simply thought of him as 'rabbi.' Thus, 'the one who sows' is a Samaritan woman who went into the city and said to people what she saw in meeting with Jesus.

The writer of John's Gospel manifestly stresses by means of editorial arrangement that it was because of the testimony of a Samaritan woman that Samaritan people came to believe Jesus. So in conformity with the witness by John's Gospel, a Samaritan woman is commemorated clearly as the first missionary to Samaria

which the Jews considered as 'dirty land of the gentiles.'

7. The Jew and the Samaritans who are Becoming One

The Gospel according to John does not conclude with this scene. It goes further to report an amazing event in the history of mission. The Samaritans who had deep sense of hatred and antagonism against the Jews came to Jesus and asked him 'to stay' with them. And Jesus accepted their request, and 'stayed' there two days.

The word 'stay' in John's Gospel is a soteriological term. The Gospel witnesses to that Jesus is 'Logos which became flesh' when it tells us that "The Word dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory" (John 1:14). In contradistinction to this however, the Gospel also says that "Now when he was in Jerusalem, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; but Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man"(2:23-25). Considering this, isn't it surprising that Jesus stayed with the Samaritans when they asked him to do so?

A woman's amazing awareness and witness to who Jesus is breaks through the barrier of hatred and antagonism between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jew and the Samaritans get together, and rejoice with each other. The land Segem which was cursed is now restored to the land of reconciliation and blessing. Now, the false religious ideology that 'salvation is from the Jews' is broken so that the eschatological event of salvation for peace and unification is going to happen from the land of Samaria. This amazing event is initiated by a Samaritan woman who was despised and discriminated by the people of Jerusalem.

Furthermore, the Gospel proclaims the universality and finality of the Messiahship in eschatological sense by adding the verse 4:42. That is to say, Jesus is confessed not simply as the Messiah of their people but also as the Messiah of the world. The Samaritans said to the woman in return, "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world"(4:42). Of course, the Samaritans' saying does not intend to invalidate the woman's testimony. Rather, it simply indicates the transition of confessing subject, because they meet Jesus in direct confrontation.

Neither Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews nor the Jews who took pride in their own Law did not realize the universality and finality of Jesus' Messiahship. Nicodemus left from Jesus, and the Jews tried to kill Jesus because they thought Jesus was a Samaritan who was obsessed with devil. But a Samaritan woman could see through who Jesus was and witnessed to him so that the Samaritans came to believe in him. Through this witness in the Gospel, we now come to know who the woman is. She is in no cases a woman who is thirst for her own personal concern with marriage and affection. She is the very woman who breaks through the barrier of antagonism and discrimination, through her own seeing through that Jesus in flesh is the final prophet in eschatological terms.

The Samaritan woman to whom the Gospel of John witnesses calls our attention to

the Gospel of the third way, namely, to worship God in spirit and truth, neither in Jerusalem nor in Segem. In other words, she asks us to proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation and unification of all peoples in the world beyond the hatred and conflict among us. More concretely, she demands that we be the 'seeds' from which the trees and flowers of recovering from antagonistic division of the South and the North and reconciling between both, which were divided by the internal and external powers. Furthermore, she appeals to all the people in the world to stop the war and violences in the name of religion and justice. All the more, however, she shouts in the highest tone that women who were oppressed to be silent about their misery are to be awakened to accomplish the missionary task for reconciliation and unification.

Abstract

During the last few centuries, we have experienced a bloody history in which many people have been sacrificed in the name of 'religion', 'God', or 'ideology.' In and for this context, we cannot but raise our question as to how we can participate in the mission for peaceful coexistence and unification. Although most of male preachers have focused on the repentance and conversion of this woman after her meeting with Jesus through his mysterious power, I will try to find out a biblical model through a women in the Gospel according to John (Ch. 4) by means of historico-critical method, socio-historical method, and feminist theological analysis.

At first, In 4:1-7, the Jewish considered the Samaritans impure and condemned sinners. In response to this, the Samaritans hated the Jewish, and prohibited them to pass through the Samaritan areas. The Jewish also looked down upon the very land as 'dirty' and 'cursed'. But a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman meet in the very land.

The Gospel shows in 4:9-15 that a Samaritan woman is a woman who challenges Jesus, a Jewish man. The Jewish was prohibited from contact with any Samaritans. Accordingly, the question that a Samaritan woman asks to Jesus is the very question of challenging and protesting against the false ideology of racial segregation and sexual discrimination.

The major concern of the passages(4:16-26) is not so much with how she has lived during her marriage life as with who Jesus is. Jesus himself pays special attention to the social situation in which Samaritan women are oppressed and despised by the existing patriarchal ideologies and prejudices of the Jewish men. In other words, he entirely rejects the Jewish ideologies which abuse religious worship as means of domination and discrimination.

In 4:27-39, the writer of John's Gospel has a clear intention to emphasize that the mission to Samaria began not by disciples or apostles but by a nameless Samaritan woman who suffered from oppression and discrimination. In conformity with the witness by John's Gospel, a Samaritan woman is commemorated clearly as the first missionary to Samaria which the Jews considered as 'dirty land of the gentiles.

The Gospel according to John reports an amazing event in the history of mission in 4:40-42. The Samaritans who had deep sense of hatred and antagonism against the Jews came to Jesus and asked him 'to stay' with them. And Jesus accepted their request, and 'stayed' there two days. The word 'stay' in John's Gospel is a soteriological term.

The Samaritan woman to whom the Gospel of John witnesses calls our attention to the Gospel of the third way, namely, to worship God in spirit and truth, neither in Jerusalem nor in Segem. In other words, she asks us to proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation and unification of all peoples in the world beyond the hatred and conflict among us. More concretely, she demands that we should be the 'seeds' from which the trees and flowers of recovering from antagonistic division of the South and the North and reconciling between both. Furthermore, she appeals to all the people in the world to stop the war and violences in the name of religion and justice. All the more, however, she shouts in the highest tone that women who were oppressed to be silent about their misery are to be awakened to accomplish the missionary task for reconciliation and unification.