

7. AN EMPATHIC PARADIGM IN INTERCULTURAL TEACHING: A HERMENEUTIC REVIEW OF JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

Jungnam Suh

Author's Profile

Jungnam Suh lives in Southeast Asia and has been engaged in pioneering missions among Muslims for several years. He holds a Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies (MAIS) from MBTS. Jungnam candidate for a Doctor of Missiology in MBTS. He is particularly interested in missional dialogue with Muslims and continues to research in this area.

Abstract

This article analyzes Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-42 to highlight a missiological approach to intercultural teaching. It demonstrates how Jesus transforms a hostile theological debate into a friendly conversation, serving as a model for exemplifying an empathetic "Third Space" for His disciples. In this setting, Jesus combines firm adherence to truth with a friendly attitude in relationships. This balance of exclusive and friendly offers a guide for cross-cultural educators --- Christ-centeredness, missional community, and contextualization seeking to indigenize the local theology.

Introduction

Most theologians agree that Christianity has historically shifted from the northern to the southern continents and from the western to the eastern. At the center of this change is “*mission and theological education*.” However, despite Western theologians’ valuable and dedicated efforts in providing theological education for the Southern continents, there have been reflections and critiques. Walls raises concerns about their oversight of important theological shifts and the failure to integrate African and Asian relation-centered perspectives in these institutions.¹ This lack of relationships stymies the intellectual motivation of Third World students who prioritize relational participation.

Based on these evaluations and introspections, what missiological principles must be considered when contributing to cross-cultural theological education today? This research aims to answer this question through an interpretation of John 4:1-42. We will examine how Jesus creates a teaching environment, referred to as a “Third Space,” based on understanding and acceptance of the Samaritan woman and the “exclusive-friendly” paradigm.² Then, we will look at how, within an exclusive-friendly empathic third space, Jesus exemplifies the Christ-centeredness and contextualization of the gospel. This research will show that Jesus’ efforts aim to foster a missionary community among God’s people on this earth.

¹ Andrew F. Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 144, 148.

² Gina A. Bellofatto, “Evangelicals and Interfaith Dialogue: A New Paradigm,” Lausanne World Pulse Archives, January 2010, paras. 2, 5, <https://lausanneworldpulse.com/perspectives-php/1224/01-2010>; Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7–9.; Jesus exemplifies a pedagogical dialogical model that is exclusive in its commitment to truth while simultaneously being friendly in fostering relationships Bellofatto’s ‘Exclusive-Friendly’ concept aligns with the principle of pilgrim and indigenizing principle observed by renowned missionary historian Andrew Walls in the flow of missionary history. According to him, the Christian gospel has historically demonstrated an (exclusive) “Pilgrim principle” concerning truth and a (friendly) “Indigenizing Principle” in relationships with other cultures.

This research could help contemporary cross-cultural ministers reflect on the attitudes they should adopt when forming relationships with others, including students, and when dealing with specific theological issues within the field of theological education.

The Relationship between Intercultural Theological Education and John 4:1-42

The passage of John 4:1-42 has been subject to various interpretations, often viewed in the context of interreligious dialogue and as a foundational text for missionary work extending beyond Jewish communities. Typically, this passage is interpreted as an illustration of Jesus bridging cultural divides and sharing the gospel with a Samaritan woman, who is often perceived as sinful and disrespectful. This essay, however, adopts a different perspective. It focuses on how Jesus acknowledges and upholds the woman's dignity, establishes rapport and mutual trust, and engages in meaningful theological dialogue within this empathetic relationship.³

From this viewpoint, John 4:1-42 offers valuable insights for cross-cultural education, particularly relevant for educators working in diverse cultural settings. The process of building relationships with learners is crucial and significantly influences educational outcomes.⁴ The narrative, depicting Jesus forming a sympathetic connection with a woman from a culturally hostile background, is a model for cross-cultural educators. It encourages them to eschew negative elements like cultural imperialism and to foster relationships conducive to cross-

³ Rose Mukansengimana-Nyirimana and Jonathan A. Draper, "The Peacemaking Role of the Samaritan Woman in John 4:1-42: A Mirror and Challenge to Rwandan Women," *Neotestamentica* 46, no. 2 (2012): 309.

⁴ Bob Heaton, "1. Teaching Cross-Culturally . . . Did I Learn More Than My Students?," in *Teaching across Cultures: A Global Christian Perspective (ICETE Series)*, ed. Riad Kassis Michael A. Ortiz (Carlisle, Cumbria.: Langham Creative Projects, 2021), 30.

cultural education.⁵ Additionally, the theological discourse between Jesus and the Samaritan woman provides the clue for exploring key missionary theological themes: *Christ-centeredness, a missionary community, and contextualization seeking the indigenization of the local theology.*

The Definition of Terms

The “Third Space” represents the intersection of cultural boundaries, providing a platform for educators and students from diverse cultures to exchange valuable perspectives. This collaborative approach promotes unique learning opportunities as students from diverse backgrounds connect their experiences with the educational environment, fostering an appreciation for both shared similarities and cultural distinctions. Lopes and Panotto emphasize the significance of creating a “Third Space” for dialogue within educational settings. In this milieu, educators are afforded the unique opportunity to engage with a plurality of students hailing from diverse cultural and epistemological backgrounds, while refraining from imposing their cultural paradigms or ideological viewpoints.⁶

Homi K. Bhabha first proposed the concept of the “Third Space” in cross-cultural education. Says Bhabha,

The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.⁷

⁵ Nicolás Panotto and César Lopes, “7. Emancipating Cross-Cultural Teaching,” in *Teaching across Cultures: A Global Christian Perspective (ICETE Series)*, ed. Riad Kassis Michael A. Ortiz (Carlisle, Cumbria.: Langham Creative Projects, 2021), 130.; Nicolás Panotto and César Lopes introduce the concept of a “third space,” where new dialogues and empathy are formed “between I and the other” from diverse cultural backgrounds.

⁶ Perry Shaw et al., *Teaching across Cultures (ICETE Series)*, ed. Riad Kassis Michael A. Ortiz (Carlisle, Cumbria.: Langham Creative Projects, 2021), 22, 130.

⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (NY: Routledge, 1994). 37.

This concept has been utilized in interesting ways in educational research and practice. Anita Souto-Manning elaborates,

The *Third Space* bridges school, home, and what lies between them, offering students a bridge across different cultural contexts. It enables students to find connections between what they are learning in school and their personal, familial, and community experiences.⁸

“The exclusive-friendly dialogue paradigm,” is similar, argues Bellofatto, from the Lausanne World Pulse Archives. She critiques the traditional “Old Dialogue Paradigm” for its focus on the lowest common denominator between Christianity and others. According to her, the Old Paradigm merely aimed for mutual agreement through theological compromise, leading to only a minimal understanding between parties. It is why, in the old paradigm, it is difficult to share the essence of the Christian faith. In contrast, she introduces a New Paradigm for Interreligious Dialogue, which notably accepts and encourages acknowledging differences. This approach does not require participants to agree with each other. It views conversation as an opportunity to learn about others and to challenge stereotypes. Thus, it allows for maintaining one's own religious exclusivity while recognizing and respecting different perspectives.⁹

Missiological Hermeneutic of John 4:1-42

Now that we have considered a paradigm through which we might consider cross-cultural teaching and the intersection of cultural

⁸ Mariana Souto-Manning, *Multicultural Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom: Approaches, Strategies, and Tools, Preschool-2nd Grade* (Teachers College Press, 2013). 48.

⁹ Bellofatto, “Evangelicals and Interfaith Dialogue: A New Paradigm,” paras. 2, 5. Although her perspective is focused on interfaith dialogue, her exclusive-friendly paradigm also has missionary potential for application in forming relationships between educators and cross-cultural students in pedagogical context.

boundaries, we want to consider the biblical data related to this topic. With that in mind, we turn our attention to John 4 to examine Jesus' example.

The Setting of John 4:1-42

So far, various methodologies and viewpoints have led scholars to different interpretations of the structural composition of this text. For the current discourse, it is particularly relevant to analyze the structure, focusing on the missional reading of John 4:1-42. Says Kwon,

In this sense, the Samaritan episode is “a miniature of the whole Gospel” as Okure names. Michaels points out that “[t]he Samaritan community speaks for all gentiles, acknowledging Jesus as ‘Savior’ not simply of Samaritans in addition to Jews, but of the whole world.” The story does not end with the coming of the Samaritans to Jesus.¹⁰

Kwon interprets the Gospel of John as demonstrating Jesus' intention for his disciples to continue constructing *the missionary community* he initiated in God's mission. The passage in John 4:1-42 illustrates Jesus confronting the Jews and interacting with Gentiles, thereby teaching his disciples about the identity and scope of the new *missionary community* he has initiated. Based on his missional conception, this essay reinterprets the composition of the *missionary community* perspective presented by Kwon.¹¹

- 4:1-15 Jesus' attempt at a spiritual conversation and the woman's rejection
- 4:16-18 formation of empathy between Jesus and the woman

¹⁰ Sungghan Kwon, “A Missional Reading of the Fourth Gospel” (Oxford, Middlesex University, 2019). 108.; Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42.* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 55.; J Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John. The New International Commentary on the New Testament.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 270.

¹¹ Kwon, “A Missional Reading of the Fourth Gospel,” 50.

- 4:19-24 Jesus and the woman's first theological conversation (Which worship is true?)
- 4:25-26 Jesus and the woman's second theological conversation (Who is the Messiah?)
- 4:27-38 Teachings to disciples about the new *missionary community* of God
- 4:39-42 The beginning of a new *missionary community* of God in the Gentile land

Jesus' Interaction with the Samaritan Woman (4:1–26)

1) *John 4:1-15: Jesus' Attempt at a Dialogue and the Woman's Rejection*

The event begins with the hostile tension between the Jewish and Samaritan communities at the time, as indicated by Section -1 in Figure 1. We see evidence of this tension in the phrases: “Now he had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4) and “The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?’ (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)” (John 4:9). Furthermore, the way the woman addresses Jesus as “You” in John 4:9 underscores her hostile feelings, indicative of a Samaritan woman who harbors resentment towards Jews.

What causes these hostile feelings? Firstly, both camps share a common heritage from the faith of Israel. However, they hold different theological interpretations regarding the sanctity of Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim. For the woman, the Samaritan Pentateuch is authoritative, having been revised from the original Pentateuch.¹² Secondly, these differing theological interpretations have become ingrained in their respective religious traditions over a long history. As

¹² Ronald J. Sim, “The Samaritan Woman in John 4,” *Journal of Translation* 11, no. 1 (2015): 150–51, <https://doi.org/10.54395/jot-vex9t>.

Tenny notes, to the Jews, the Samaritans were seen as renegades and syncretists who mixed Hellenistic culture with the Mosaic Law.¹³

Despite the adverse situation, Jesus demonstrated centrifugal-missional principles to embrace cross-cultural situations and historical or political antagonisms. Jesus set aside his cultural norms and initiated a dialogue with a woman who viewed him with contempt and repudiation. Properly understood, this suggests that, akin to Jesus, missionaries entrusted with theological education in foreign cultures must first relinquish their familiar paradigms, engage with the indigenous populace, and forge meaningful relationships. Based on Jesus' attitude, we can make two observations. First, Jesus laid aside his Jewish tradition and disregarded the Rabbinic warning that forbade him to converse publicly with a woman. Second, he abandoned the tradition in Jewish literature that depicted women as impious. Malina and Rohrbaugh note that Jesus asking the woman for water implies two people sharing the same bowl of water, a practice considered legally tainted and severely frowned upon by the standards of the Pharisees.¹⁴

To understand the intention of the conversation that Jesus sought to have with the Samaritan woman, it is first necessary to understand who she was. The Samaritan woman may have had flaws that alienated her from her neighbors or possessed a rough character. Nonetheless, she was educated on theological and political matters, indicating that she could engage in discussions about religious, theological, and spiritual issues. She was a woman who found her religious roots and identity in her ancestors and community, as indicated in John 4:12.¹⁵ Says Mali,

¹³ Merrill C. Tenney, "John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 54.

¹⁴ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 99.

¹⁵ "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" (John 4:12, NIV)

Although the woman misread Jesus, she was not uneducated in the theological and political issues of her time.¹⁶

Most interpreters concur that the woman exhibited a tendency towards reclusiveness in her interactions with others. This inclination is reflected in her decision to fetch water during the day's hottest part, a time when others typically avoided the well. Wright underscores the woman's reclusive nature, suggesting a somewhat detached personality from societal norms. Her choice to visit the well at an unconventional hour, combined with the considerable distance from her village, indicates a deliberate effort to avoid the usual gathering of women. This behavior reveals her active avoidance of social interaction and depicts her as someone who prefers midday's intense solitude over her fellow villagers' communal warmth.¹⁷

Jesus leads the conversation towards spiritual matters with the reclusive Gentile woman, as seen in John 4:13-15.¹⁸ Specifically, in John 4:13-14, Jesus introduces the concept of spiritual salvation by discussing living water. Then, in John 4:15, the distinction between Jesus' intention to engage in a spiritual dialogue and the woman's inability to comprehend its spiritual significance becomes clear. This interaction echoes the scene in John 4:11.¹⁹ Despite Jesus' spiritual issues, the woman continues to perceive and respond in a literal, non-spiritual manner, asking about the physical water. Her responses

¹⁶ Joseph F Mali, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Model for Dialogue," in *Can Muslims and Christians Resolve Their Religious and Social Conflicts?: Case From Africa and the United States*, ed. Iwuchukwu Marinus C. and Brian Stiltner (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 154.

¹⁷ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 41.

¹⁸ "13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." (John 4:13-15, NIV)

¹⁹ John D. Barry et al., "Faithlife Study Bible," Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2016, pt. John 4:15.

throughout the conversation highlight her ongoing focus on the literal rather than the spiritual message Jesus presents.²⁰

In other words, despite the hurt in the woman's heart, as shown by the woman's reclusiveness, Jesus continued to attempt a spiritual conversation—*transitioning from physical water to living water and ultimately to eternal life*. This conversation represents an initial move towards dismantling cultural divides and forming *a new community centered on mission*. Kwon evaluates Jesus' evangelistic attempt as “breaking the Socio-Religious impossibility” which is Jesus’ ministry efforts approach to establish a *missionary community*.²¹

2) *John 4:16-18; Formation of Empathy Between Jesus and the Woman*

As we have seen, the conversation between these two has been a hostile situation from the beginning. The flow of conversation has a negative slope from the beginning (Section 1 in Figure 1). Nevertheless, it is observed at the turning point where the gradient shifts from negative to positive (Section 2 in Figure 1); verses 16-18. Though partially stunted, the intimacy resonates once again in verses 16-17.²²

²⁰ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 205; Tenney, “*John*,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, 9:55.

²¹ Kwon, “A Missional Reading of the Fourth Gospel,” 105.

²² He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” (John 4:16-18, NIV)

The evolution in the woman's perception of Jesus is discernible through the progression of *titles* she ascribes to him. Initially, she refers to Jesus simply as "You" (verse 9), which then evolves into Teacher (verses 11, 15, 19) as their conversation unfolds. Following their first substantive exchange (verses 16-24), she recognizes him as Prophet (verse 19), and finally, after their second discussion (verses 25-26), she acknowledges him as the Messiah (verse 28).

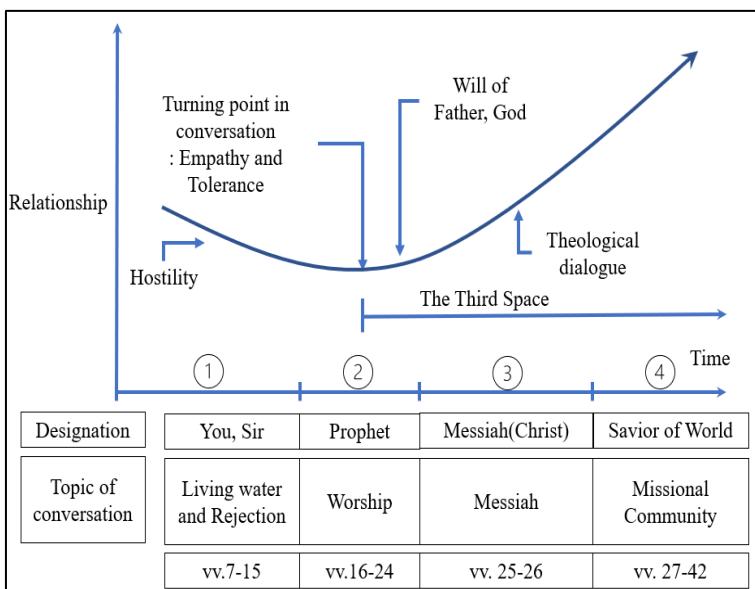


Figure 1. The plot of the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman

Moreover, the evolution of their discourse is reflected in the gradual shift of topics towards deeper theological matters. Even though Jesus initially tried to engage her in spiritual dialogue about the water of eternal life (verse 15), she seemed resistant and unresponsive. Nevertheless, the discourse undergoes a pivotal transition in verses 16-18, steering towards more profound spiritual and theological

deliberations concerning worship (verses 19-24) and the Messiah (verses 25-26).

Furthermore, it warrants attention that in verses 16-18, the Samaritan woman *initially and voluntarily* inquires of Jesus, marking a pivotal shift compared to the preceding exchanges initiated by Jesus. This juncture signifies her participation in the theological dialogue with Jesus, illustrating a dynamic of reciprocal engagement.

This turn of heart and subsequent activities begin with Jesus' question to bring her husband in verse 16. Why did Jesus ask her to call her husband? For the woman, her husband was the Achilles heel of the most bitter sin in her heart, and Jesus already knew her. Courson argues that Jesus' intended question was access for her to repent and be saved because "there can be no repentance without conviction."²³ Brochert argues that verses 16 and 17 are a dialogue related to the sexual ethics of women.²⁴ Gundry notes that by observing that the command "come" in verse 16 is singular rather than plural, Jesus already knew the woman had no husband to come with her.²⁵ What change in the woman's heart did Jesus' question bring about enabling such a positive turn in their relationship?

We can find the clue to this question in the woman's response in verse 17 and Jesus' feedback in verse 18. In verse 17, the woman says, "I have no husband," although she tries to avoid the wounds in her desperate heart.²⁶ At least for that moment, she provided a truthful and sincere response, devoid of any falsehood (verse 17). Moreover, Jesus sympathizes with and praises the woman's sincere heart even twice (verse 18).²⁷ Brochert puts it that the woman was trying to

²³ Jon Courson, *Jon Courson's Application Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 466.

²⁴ Brochert, *John 1-11, The New American Commentary*, 25A:205.

²⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations with a Literal Translation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 366.

²⁶ Brochert, *John 1-11, The New American Commentary*, 25A:205.

²⁷ The author of the Bible testifies that there were two favorable sympathies in Jesus' answer, using "right- καλῶς" and "true- ἀληθῆς." Jesus said to her, "You are

sidestep her issue.²⁸ Her response was an evasion, just as the sinful Adam and Eve hid among the trees of the garden, fleeing God's call as they walked through the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). Tenney said she had no husband whom she could contact, nor did she want to confess her sexual immorality to strangers. Her blunt but "honest answers" show that she is finally "touched."²⁹ Malina and Rohrbaugh also expound that she answered truthfully, and Jesus praised her for her sincerity twice.³⁰

Jesus says that the woman's answer is correct, "right- καλῶς," despite her sexual immorality. It did not mean that her unlawful and unethical past was right, and Jesus' saying "right" was about her saying no husband. Specifically, Jesus expresses sympathy twice with the woman's lament. Hence, it is reasonable to say that Jesus opened her heart because he sympathized with and embraced her confession and lamentation rather than because he guessed her past well like a shaman. She was able to experience the empathy and embrace of Jesus, which pushed her beyond traditional limits.

Another interpretation focuses on the change in the woman's thinking. Mali claims that Jesus referred to the woman's husband as a way to help her with her ignorance. The woman confessed Jesus as a prophet was based on a Jewish point of view after Jesus showed her past (John 4:19). However, Mali's argument focuses on women's intellectual changes, not emotional ones. If Jesus had only focused on the intellectual side, he should have induced repentance by exposing and condemning the woman's lawful sins and transgressions. On the contrary, Jesus did not expose and condemn the woman's sin.³¹ Instead,

right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."
(John 4:17-18)

²⁸ Borchert, *John 1–11*, The New American Commentary, 25A:205.

²⁹ Tenney, "John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, 9:55.

³⁰ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 99.

³¹ Courson, *Jon Courson's Application Commentary*, 148.

with *sympathy and tolerance*, he participated in women's suffering, bringing about a positive turn in the flow of conversation.

We can expand the “empathy and tolerance” that Jesus showed to the woman to 4:29. The woman said, “Come and see the man who told me everything I did. Could it be the Messiah?” The woman’s question implies hesitation and doubt. The Greek text indicates that a negative response is expected: “This cannot be the Messiah, can it?”³² Nevertheless, verse 42 shows that the woman shared many of her experiences with Jesus with other Samaritans. The woman, once isolated from her neighbors due to her past shame, now proclaims her newfound faith in the Messiah, who was hostile Jewish but not Samaritan. This transformation is not because she encountered Jesus as a miraculous soothsayer but because Jesus empathetically understood and healed her emotional wounds about her husband in the “Third Space.”

3) John 4:19-24; Jesus and the Woman’s First Theological Conversation (Which Worship Is True?)

Jesus provides a model for theological dialogue in which a cross-cultural education minister can theologically address the spiritual questions of the local. In verse 19, this short moment of questioning and conversation by Jesus became an opportunity to reveal the bitter wounds and shame in the woman’s heart that she wanted to hide from others. Having experienced Jesus’ empathy and tolerance, she allowed her heart to resonate with his character.³³

Furthermore, it becomes an opportunity to see Jesus, a Jew demeaned and called “You” and “Sir,” as a spiritual person, a prophet.³⁴

³² Douglas Mangum et al., eds., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham:WA: Lexham Press, 2016), n. John 4:29, <https://lexhampress.com/product/36338/faithlife-study-bible>.

³³ Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading the Fourth Gospel, John 1-4* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 149; Robert Jamieson Fausset, A. R., and Brown, David, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 133.

³⁴ “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet” (John 4:19)

(Section -2 in Figure 1) In verse 19, “*σee-* θεωρέω” contains “perceive, discern.”³⁵ The woman’s use of *theōreō* implies that she is increasingly intellectually (theologically) aware of the prophetic nature of Jesus through her experience with him.³⁶ According to Borchert, the woman discards her preconceived about Samaritan traditions and Jews. Then, she recognized Jesus as a prophet who knew the knowledge of God. At that time, Jews and Samaritans were waiting for a prophet (Taheb) like Moses, and they had the same expectation that the prophet would explain the law in detail.³⁷

On recognizing Jesus as a prophet, the woman now engages in a spiritual and theological conversation, which starkly contrasts to the earlier questions Jesus had first asked (Verses 7, 16). Her question is now, “Which worship is true worship?”³⁸

In verse 20, “worship-προσκόπτω” refers to human worship of the Deity.³⁹ However, this question was not simply about the place and form of worship but about which religion was right. As Lock put it, the question of the Samaritan woman, who feared the Lord and worshiped their gods synthetically (2 Kings 17:33), was a natural dialogue for religious debate.⁴⁰

We need to examine the intention of the woman who asked these questions. As for the woman’s questioning intent, commentaries such as Tenny and Phillips argue that the woman was trying to evade

³⁵ George Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (T. & T. Clark, 1922), 206.

³⁶ Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading the Fourth Gospel: John 1-4* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 149; The ones in parentheses are what I added.

³⁷ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11, The New American Commentary*. Vol. 25A. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 206.

³⁸ “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” (John 4:20, NIV)

³⁹ Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 386.

⁴⁰ W. Lock, “The Gospel According to St. John,” in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture: Including the Apocrypha*, Edited by Charles Gore, Henry Leighton Goudge, and Alfred Guillaume. Vol. 3. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), 252.

uncomfortable personal topics with Jesus into a religious debate.⁴¹ In contrast, other commentaries have opposing views as Tenny and Phillips. Moloney and Gundry note that the woman's question has to do with the truthfulness of the confession in verse 19, and this question was not an evasion to hide a woman's shame.⁴² Gundry sees the woman trying to appeal to Jesus' prophetic insight for her resentment. According to him, Palestinian women in the first century could be widowed more than once, and since they had no right to divorce, he argues that this woman was a likely victim.⁴³ Thus, by engaging in a deeper dialogue with Jesus based on personal sympathy formed with Jesus, she could not help but question the old "religious dispute" between Jews and Samaritans, the woman's traditional barriers.

In verse 21, Jesus presents to pastors involved in multicultural theological education an exemplary model of dialogue that emphasizes the essence over the form of faith, concurrently exhibiting tolerance towards the indigenous cultural identities of local communities. Jesus elects not to efface the woman's Samaritan identity but rather to shepherd her towards an understanding of the divine volition and essence of the Father, who yearns for communion with her through Him through faithful worship.⁴⁴ This signifies a shift away from the traditional theological polemics that have historically characterized the interactions between these two theological camps, steering her focus toward an engagement with the transcendent, divine intent of the "heart of the Father, God" (John 4:21). The woman turns her gaze from her father (ancestor) to Jesus' father (God).⁴⁵ This expression of Jesus calling God Father must have been a surprising challenge to the woman.⁴⁶ Borchert says that Jesus turned the subject of the

⁴¹ Merrill C. Tenney, "John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Vol. 9. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 55. Richard D. Phillips, *John*, Edited by Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani. 1st ed. Vol. 1 & 2. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 245.

⁴² Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, 149.

⁴³ Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 367.

⁴⁴ "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. (John 4:21)

⁴⁵ Courson. *Jon Courson's Application Commentary*, 467.

⁴⁶ Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, 150.

conversation from the place of worship to the essence of worship, representing a very evangelistic model.⁴⁷

Verses 22-24 presents a comprehensive *Christ-centered theology*.⁴⁸ Jesus led this theological issue to the *Christ-centered* discourse. The evangelist underscores Jesus' role as a "reliable witness" to God's desire. Addressing the theological theme of a worship experience that is spiritually profound and centered on truth, transcending conventional ethnic limitations, Jesus elucidates to the woman the concept of redemption that is Christ-centric, a revelation of God consistently present since the Old Testament era. Gerald underscores the pivotal role of Jesus in redefining worship in verse 22. Jesus, speaking to the Samaritan woman, points to the transition from a limited, ethnocentric understanding of worship to one that is more inclusive and grounded in true knowledge. It highlights that the salvation and revelation of God through Jesus Christ, "God's working in history," while emerging from Jewish heritage, are universally accessible and not confined to a single ethnic group.⁴⁹ This verse lays the foundation for a worship that is rooted in a deeper understanding of God, as revealed through Jesus Christ, a *Christ-centered worship*.

In the same context, Carter links verses 22-24 to John 3:31 from a *Christ-centered perspective*, where Jesus is depicted as "a reliable witness" to know God.⁵⁰ The woman yearned for genuine worship of God, and Jesus made her longing to reach God through himself as the Word of God. Moreover, he interprets the "hour" for worship in spirit and truth as referring to the period of Jesus' death and resurrection. In essence, through salvation accomplished by Jesus'

⁴⁷ Borchert, *John 1–11*, 207.

⁴⁸ You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." (John 4:22-24, NIV)

⁴⁹ Borchert, *John 1–11*, 25A:207; Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, 128.

⁵⁰ The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. (John 3:31, NIV)

suffering and rising again, humankind can overcome misconceptions such as racial superiority and genuinely connect with the heavenly Father in worship. This is because salvation represents the complete restoration of harmony between God and humanity.⁵¹

4) 4:25-26; Jesus and the Woman’s Second Theological Conversation (Who Is the Messiah?)

In 4:25-26, following her initial inquiry, the woman poses a second theological question concerning the Messiah (as depicted in Figure 1, Section 3).⁵² Historically, the Samaritans anticipated the arrival of *Taheb*, a figure distinct from the Jewish conception of an anointed Son of David. In contrast to the Jewish expectation of a political and royal Messiah, the Samaritan interpretation of *Taheb* was that of a teacher, devoid of any political leadership role.⁵³ This distinction underscores a fundamental theological divergence between the Samaritans and Jews: while the Jews awaited a Messiah from “David’s house,” the Samaritans looked for *Taheb*, a spiritual teacher who would guide them in understanding and practicing their faith. Nevertheless, Jesus agrees with the woman’s Samaritan concept of the Messiah; “I am he.”⁵⁴

In other words, Jesus exemplifies this by utilizing indigenous theological resources and revealing His identity as she awaited “*Taheb*,” thereby providing a more enriched and profound understanding of *contextualization* and indigenizing the gospel in the future. By integrating the messianic reality with the non-Jewish notion of *Taheb*, the Samaritan woman resolves a profound spiritual quandary. More

⁵¹ Matt Carter and Josh Wredberg, *Exalting Jesus in John* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 142.

⁵² The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” (John 4:25-26)

⁵³ Joseph F. Mali, “Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Model for Dialogue” in *Can Muslims and Christians Resolve Their Religious and Social Conflicts? Case From Africa and the United States*, Edited by Iwuchukwu, Marinus C., and Brian Stiltner. (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 162.

⁵⁴ “Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” (John 4:26, NIV)

specifically, Jesus did not abolish the woman's Samaritan conception of the Messiah but instead implanted the evangelical DNA within the framework of the Samaritan culture. Namely, it is his *contextualization model*. Says Caldwell,

Jesus also used Samaritan religious terminology critically. Samaritans, as mentioned above, expected a Taheb to appear and restore true worship, on Mt. Gerizim in particular. It is therefore no accident that Jesus addresses the theme of true worship, but note the context in which he does this. Samaritans believed the Taheb would be the prophet promised by Moses.⁵⁵

Teachings to Disciples of the New Missionary Community of God (4:27–38)

In John 4:27-30, Jesus promotes the disciples' understanding of the *missionary community paradigm*. The profound spiritual transformation of a Samaritan woman, a non-Jewish individual, posed a significant challenge to the disciples, who held the belief that salvation was exclusive to Jews. However, through these challenges, Jesus enabled his disciples to witness the Samaritans, previously considered outsiders, being embraced as a new community united in their faith in Jesus. Through this experience, the disciples acquired a profound understanding of the formation and purpose of a *missionary community* under God's guidance. Quoting Okure's insight, Kwon explains that Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman had a didactic purpose: to prepare his disciples to become a *missionary community* on a post-Jesus mission.⁵⁶ In this respect, Phillips describes the inner situation of the disciples at the time as follows.

⁵⁵ Stuart Caldwell, "A Paradigm for Church Planting Among Muslims," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 17:1 Spring (2000): 27.

⁵⁶ Sungchan Kwon, "A Missional Reading of the Fourth Gospel." (PhD diss., Oxford: Middlesex University, 2019), 107

The disciples thought only in terms of the stifling social conventions of their time and could not see the spiritual transformation taking place. They could not imagine a sinner's becoming a saint, and they were particularly skeptical about a Gentile being admitted into the company of God's people, especially a Gentile woman. They were surprised by grace—indeed, *dismayed* or *appalled* by grace might be more accurate! Their minds were fixed on the social status quo rather than the ground-shaking effects of Christ's coming.⁵⁷

In verses 28-30, a transformative life is depicted wherein members of the missionary community, established through the power of the gospel, undergo evangelical cultural change (represented as Section- 4 in Figure 1). The narrative presents a fresh image of the Samaritan woman who, having experienced spiritual salvation, stands in contrast to the disciples entrenched in Jewish stereotypes.⁵⁸

This woman's transformed demeanor serves as a testimony to the missionary life that Jesus envisions for his future disciples. Firstly, she is liberated from the wounds and sins of her past, experiencing a profound renewal through her faith in Jesus. Secondly, the woman is emancipated from her historical afflictions and transgressions, encountering profound renewal through her allegiance to Jesus. Contrasting her prior tendency to shun her neighbors (John 4:15), she now fearlessly communicates her interaction with Jesus, a Jewish man. Thirdly, she demonstrates a commitment to propagate Jesus's teachings over maintaining her cultural customs, evidencing a willingness to replace her traditional practices with the gospel. In defiance of the prevailing social norms, she daringly enters the male-dominated sectors of the city. And she forthrightly discusses her prohibited

⁵⁷ Richard D. Phillips, *John*, Edited by Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani. 1st ed. Vol. 1 & 2. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 262-263.

⁵⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him. (John 4:28-30)

interaction with a Jewish individual.⁵⁹ The missiological influence that she shows in her community is what today's cross-cultural educators want their students to be.

The Arrival of a New Missionary Community of God in The Gentile Land (4:39–42)

Verses 39–42 explore the establishment of God's *missionary community* in Samaria, initiated by Jesus.⁶⁰ The intention for this missional community was already indicated by Jesus in verse 21. Notably, the phrase "Believe me, woman" is in the singular form, while "you will worship" is in the plural form. This linguistic distinction implies that a broader group or community of fellow Samaritans will soon come to believe in Jesus alongside the woman.⁶¹

Moreover, John 39–42 portrays a missional model with the capacity for reproduction that addresses the significance of indigenizing the gospel for cross-cultural education ministers. The *missionary community* accomplishes its reproductive missionary essence through theological growth and development. The woman who experiences salvation through the gospel serves as an exemplar, as she subsequently directs other Samaritans to Jesus. This theological realization expands upon the woman's initial recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, now embracing Him as the world's Savior.⁶²

⁵⁹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 100–11.

⁶⁰ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So, when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." (John 4:39–42)

⁶¹ Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 367.

⁶² Courson, *Jon Courson's Application Commentary*, 469.

Conclusion

John 4:1-42 informs contemporary cross-cultural educators about the relational attitude they should adopt. It exemplifies the creation of an *empathetic space*, akin to the “third space” in intercultural theological education discussed by Pannotto and Lopes. The turning point of empathy between the woman and Jesus led her to open up from her entrenched traditional hostility toward the Jews. Subsequently, she engages in a theological dialogue with Jesus, seeking biblical truth with an open heart.

The initiation of this theological dialogue was worship, which connected to the essence of the Gospel, the Messiah. Notably, the woman initiated all theological inquiries, and Jesus engaged in a thoroughly *Christocentric* conversation. Jesus’ empathy was “exclusive-friendly” without compromising the essence of faith.

Furthermore, Jesus’ approach of not outright rejecting the woman’s conception of the Messiah is noteworthy for contemporary cross-cultural ministry educators. The Messiah she was waiting as a Samaritan version. Although it was not a Judean Messiah concept, Jesus *converted* her perspective. The woman fostered a more organically evolving faith by encountering the Messiah within her cultural milieu. Jesus’s approach underpins the missiological legitimacy of *contextualization* in addressing *indigenous* theology by insiders.

In conclusion, John 4:1-42 guides cross-cultural missionaries to create a shared empathetic realm with the locals rather than setting *Cultural Imperialism*. Within this realm of empathy, it advises striving for the inculcation of the gospel through *Christ-centered and contextualization*, *seeking the indigenization of the local theology*. All these efforts aim to foster a missional community led by God’s people, where the gospel takes root and theology is indigenized in the Majority World.

Bibliography

Abbott-Smith, George. *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*. T. & T. Clark, 1922.

Barry, John D., Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, Michael S. Heiser, Miles Custis, Elliot Ritzema, and D. Bomar. “Faithlife Study Bible.” *Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software*, 2016, 2012.

Bellofatto, Gina A. “Evangelicals and Interfaith Dialogue: A New Paradigm.” Lausanne World Pulse Archives, January 2010. <https://lausanneworldpulse.com/perspectives-php/1224/01-2010>.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. NY: routledge, 1994.

Borchert, Gerald L. *John 1–11, The New American Commentary*. Vol. 25A. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996.

Caldwell, Stuart. “A Paradigm for Church Planting Among Muslims,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 17:1 Spring (2000): 25–31.

Carter, Matt, and Wredberg, Josh. *Exalting Jesus in John*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017.

Courson, Jon. *Jon Courson’s Application Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

Gundry, Robert H. *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations with a Literal Translation*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010.

Heaton, Bob. “1. Teaching Cross-Culturally . . . Did I Learn More Than My Students?” In *Teaching across Cultures: A Global Christian Perspective (ICETE Series)*, edited by Riad Kassis Michael A. Ortiz, 25–38. Carlisle, Cumbria.: Langham Creative Projects, 2021.

Jamieson, Robert, Fausset, A. R., and Brown, David. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. Vol. 2. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.

Kwon, Sungchan. “A Missional Reading of the Fourth Gospel.”

Middlesex University, 2019.

Mali, Joseph F. "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: A Model for Dialogue." In *Can Muslims and Christians Resolve Their Religious and Social Conflicts?: Case From Africa and the United States*, edited by Iwuchukwu Marinus C. and Brian Stiltner, 145–71. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Pess, 2013.

Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998.

Mangum, Douglas, Derek R. Brown, Michael S. Heiser, Miles Custis, Elliot Ritzema, Matthew M. Whitehead, Michael R. Grigoni, and David Bomar, eds. *Faithlife Study Bible*. Bellingham:WA: Lexham Press, 2016.
<https://lexhampress.com/product/36338/faithlife-study-bible>.

Moloney, Francis J. *Belief in the Word: Reading the Fourth Gospel, John 1-4*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.

Mukansengimana-Nyirimana, Rose, and Jonathan A. Draper. "The Peacemaking Role of the Samaritan Woman in John 4:1-42: A Mirror and Challenge to Rwandan Women." *Neotestamentica* 46, no. 2 (2012): 299–318.

Panotto, Nicolás, and César Lopes. "7. Emancipating Cross-Cultural Teaching." In *Teaching across Cultures: A Global Christian Perspective (ICETE Series)*, edited by Riad Kassis Michael A. Ortiz. Carlisle, Cumbria.: Langham Creative Projects, 2021.

Shaw, Perry, César Lopes, Joanna Feliciano-Soberano, and Bob Heaton. *Teaching across Cultures (ICETE Series)*. Edited by Riad Kassis Michael A. Ortiz. Carlisle, Cumbria.: Langham Creative Projects, 2021.

Sim, Ronald J. "The Samaritan Woman in John 4." *Journal of Translation* 11, no. 1 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.54395/jot-vez9t>.

Souto-Manning, Mariana. *Multicultural Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom: Approaches, Strategies, and Tools, Preschool-2nd Grade*. Teachers College Press, 2013.

Tenney, Merrill C. “*John*,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts*. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Vol. 9. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981.

Walls, Andrew F. *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. NY: Orbis Books, 2015.

Wright, Tom. *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004.