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# John 4:1-42 and the Clarity of the Bible

**Benjamin Sargent**

Whilst the perspicuity is principally a theological commitment to God's faithfulness in revealing his word clearly to those who seek him, rather than a philosophical commitment to realism, the challenge that it faces comes in the form of a challenge to realism. A popular view has arisen following the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur which views the meaning of a text as completely dependent upon what the reader brings to it from his or her own background. A text therefore has no clear universal meaning which is accessible to all, rather it's 'meanings' differ hugely between readers.

Whilst it is right to recognise the factors (often sinful) that we as readers of the Bible bring to the text, it is not definitely the case that different cultural assumptions must equal different readings of the Bible. In the first century AD, readers or hearers of John 4:1-42 coming from either a Greek or a Jewish background could leave the text convicted in the same way by the person of the Lord Jesus. Though coming to the text with completely different literary assumptions, with vastly different stories having been told to them, they may have perceived the clear sense of the passage in the same way.

## **Type-scenes and their resistance to clarity**

The reader's literary 'cultural baggage' which would most likely lead to different readings of the text comes in the form of 'type-scenes'. These are scenes from popular stories which occur in recognisable forms in many places; to the extent that a reader can assume that certain things will take place in a certain scene. For example, the climactic scene of a James Bond film usually takes place as Bond assaults the base of the enemy. When the scene begins, familiar viewers can be sure that he will come face to face with the bad-guy, there will be a tense countdown followed by an explosion and a witty comment. In the same way, a background of hearing familiar stories leads readers to expect certain things from a text, especially if that text begins a scene in a way that reminds the reader of a popular form.

An appreciation of the possibility of the influence of type-scenes in the writing or reading of the Bible is a relatively recent phenomenon. Even when the

possibility of allusion to a type-scene is recognised, it is often dismissed without any consideration as to how it might influence the theology of the text. This is certainly the case in Westcott's commentary of 1887, one of the foundational texts for critical Johannine scholarship.<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s, a decade which saw a dramatic rise in the amount of scholarly work on John's Gospel, little was noted on the possible allusions to type-scenes in John 4:1-42, despite the scale of some of the work. Commentaries by Schnackenburg, Barrett and Braun make no mention of any type-scene in relation to this passage.<sup>2</sup> This trend continued and can be seen in Haenchen's 1980 commentary.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1980s, the use of type-scenes in biblical comment took off, following the publication of Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Alter argued that a consideration of conventions popular at the time of a text's composition is essential if one is to understand the significance of the stories it contains.<sup>4</sup> He claimed that this was particularly the case when an audience's knowledge of a convention or type-scene was assumed by the author who then deliberately undermined or subverted that scene in order to emphasise something peculiar to his text.<sup>5</sup> The change in the type-scene would have been obvious to those who were acquainted with it, but to a reader without that acquaintance the change would be invisible, and so would the author's subtle point. Therefore, Alter argued that to appreciate what was happening in some biblical texts, awareness of type-scenes and their possible subversion was essential. Hence, it is easy to see that type-scenes, even when intended by an author, can be problematic for the perspicuity of Scripture. Alter also highlighted the use of a type-scene from the Old Testament in which a man meets a woman at a well. (Gen. 24:10-61, 29:1-20; Exod. 2:15b-21).<sup>6</sup> The characteristics common to all these which are suggestive of convention are—a man meets a woman in a foreign land, he meets her at a well, she runs back to her family to announce the visitor and a betrothal is arranged.<sup>7</sup> The man is usually someone of high status and importance in the narrative, respectively; a representative of Isaac, Jacob himself and Moses.

The idea that this betrothal type-scene can be seen in John 4:1-42 has been taken up by a few scholars including Carmichael, Duke, Maccini and Eslinger,<sup>8</sup> however, this has not been universally accepted.<sup>9</sup> Of those who do recognise allusions in John to the betrothal type-scene, it is only really Eslinger who offers an extended explanation of the passage based on it. This reading will be

examined in some detail below. It is perhaps not surprising that so many scholars do not attempt such an explanation, after all, how should one deal with an allusion which seems to suggest that Jesus is about to get married? Carmichael does well to incorporate the idea of the betrothal scene into the marriage language of the preceding passage<sup>10</sup> to be able to talk of the passage asserting a kind of spiritual marriage, centred on renewed worship through the mediation of Jesus,<sup>11</sup> however, the range of such spiritual options is limited and hard to tie down in the text. If there seems to be nothing exegetically profitable from the text's similarity with the betrothal scene, perhaps this similarity really is accidental and should be ignored, as Lindars suggests.<sup>12</sup>

### John 4:1-42 through first-century Jewish eyes

How can the betrothal type-scene inform a reading of John 4:1-42? Eslinger uses it as the primary hermeneutical tool with which to approach the passage. His approach focuses on the reader, arguing that the use of the type-scene enables the text itself to act upon him, making him identify with those in the text who have misunderstood Jesus up to that point, i.e. Mary and Nicodemus.<sup>13</sup>

Eslinger begins by outlining the betrothal type-scene, noting the similarities between the basic pentateuchal scenes and John 4:1-42. He sees similarities, besides those fundamental ones, such as a conversation between a man and a woman and the inclusion of a well, between—

- Moses' escape from the Egyptians just prior to his well-scene and Jesus' flight from the Pharisees who had just heard of the number of baptisms he was performing
- the time of day Jacob arrives at the well and the time Jesus arrives
- Eliezer's request for water and the same request made by Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

These similarities, Eslinger argues, lead the first time reader who has an acquaintance with the type-scene into assuming that a betrothal is about to take place.<sup>15</sup> The reader's assumption would then be confirmed by sexual overtones of what follows, notably by the use of water related terms such as 'spring' and 'well' which are used in Proverbs as part of a metaphor to discuss sexual relations.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Eslinger claims that terms such as 'have no dealings/relations' in verse nine, also suggest the idea of sexual relations whilst he is able to give a compelling reading up to verse sixteen which interprets each statement as potential verbal foreplay.<sup>17</sup> The reader, coming to this passage via

the first three chapters of the gospel would be well acquainted with the failure of the various characters to realise who Jesus is.

John who asserts Jesus' true identity in places such as the prologue encourages this recognition.<sup>18</sup> Thoroughly expecting betrothal, following the allusions made to Moses' first journey out of Egypt as well as a marital metaphor (ch. 3), 'the reading experience moves the reader from ersatz, second-hand understanding of human failure to comprehend Jesus, to a culpable, direct share in that same failure'.<sup>19</sup> When Jesus destroys the expectation of betrothal (v. 16),<sup>20</sup> embarrassing both the Samaritan Woman and the reader for the assumptions they have made about Jesus, the reader is able to appreciate the reality of failing to grasp who Jesus is, rather than merely watching others make that mistake. Eslinger explains that this is a rhetorical trap within the text to destroy any sense of the reader's innocence or special knowledge of Jesus, only possible because of the audience's knowledge of the type scene.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the reader's knowledge of the betrothal type-scene emphasises the transcendence of the person of Christ over human comprehension, not only showing it using examples of remote characters but through the reader's own experience of misunderstanding. The text is not merely a passive object to be observed and mastered, but one which has an active didactic rhetorical role.<sup>22</sup> It can never be known whether John intended such allusions, but none-the-less, they would undoubtedly form part of the Jewish reader's approach to the text. In light of this, it would seem that only a first-century Jewish reader, well versed in the Scriptures, could understand John 4. It would not be clear to others. Where does this leave the Greek reader? Will he not be convicted by the text in the same way? Following suggestions by Duke and Beasley-Murray,<sup>23</sup> it will be argued that a type-scene reading was also available for Greek readers and that this scene, like the Hebrew betrothal scene emphasises one of the key themes of the gospel, the divine transcendence and uniqueness of the Lord Jesus.

### **The Greek type scene: clarity beyond culture?**

One finds in Greek literature from Homer onwards a popular type-scene of mistaken identity. This scene is not nearly as complex as the betrothal scene but usually features four elements; mistaken identity, a man and a woman in conversation, a direct but unrealised reference to the true identity of one of the conversationalists and an interruption from outside the conversation, either

from a person or an object.<sup>24</sup> This scene can be found in this form in Homer's *Odyssey*, between Odysseus and the old maid in book nineteen and Odysseus and Penelope in book twenty-three. In the first scene, an old maid washes Odysseus' feet thinking him an unknown traveller. She discusses many things relating to Odysseus and the Trojan campaign without realising who he is until she sees a scar on his foot and realises. The second scene occurs as Odysseus and his wife fail to recognise one another. When Odysseus describes how he made their marriage bed they recognise each other. It may be the case that subsequent scenes are derived from these. Euripides also includes two of these type-scenes in his *Helen*.

The first of these scenes occurs between Helen and an Argive warrior named Teucer.<sup>25</sup> Teucer, failing to recognise Helen, complains about the great catastrophe she has caused and states how much she is hated by the Greeks, after she has asked him whether the Argives succeeded in capturing herself, 'the Spartan Woman'! Even more tantalising is Teucer's confession that the Helen he meets looks a great deal like the Helen he hates, though there is no recognition. The second is between Helen and her husband Menelaus. In this romantic scene, neither party are at first able to identify the other. Helen understands Menelaus to be a kidnapper whilst he is interested in following her because she seems afraid. Helen is the first to recognise her spouse but it is only when a messenger intervenes that Menelaus is able to accept who she is.<sup>26</sup> The scene eventually results in recognition due to some kind of interruption or revelation, but in other cases where there is no interruption, as was the case with Teucer and Helen, there is no recognition.<sup>27</sup>

What is even more compelling about the Euripidean scenes is the chorus which follows them and acts as a statement on the nature of reality.<sup>28</sup> The chorus states that the reality visible to the characters has little or no relation to what the gods are accomplishing through it. This accounts for the confusion and lack of recognition in the type scenes. It could be argued that to Greek readers this bore considerable similarity to the Johannine stress upon the transcendence of the person of Christ from unaided human knowledge.

It is worth noting that the scenes referred to above are all found within the Homeric Return genre, tales which recount the homeward journeys from Troy of the characters of the *Illiad*. Such texts had immense religious and cultural value,

providing a colourful sense of cultural history as well as outlining the way in which the nation's gods interact with mankind. It would be fair to regard this literature as normative in Hellenic society and that therefore the conventions regarding the mistaken identity type-scene would be well known and possibly assumed by the reader who approaches John's Gospel from this background.

How then would such a person read the episode of the Samaritan Woman? In each case of the type-scene noted above, the male conversationalist is on a journey home when he meets his counterpart. This is true also of Jesus who is travelling through Samaria as a means of getting to Galilee.<sup>29</sup> This alone may not induce the Greek reader to think of the type-scene, but when Jesus enters into conversation with a woman and she fails to understand who he is despite his constant reference to his ability to give her a divine and eternal gift,<sup>30</sup> the reader might well assume that the scene falls into the conventions of a mistaken identity scene. The Samaritan Woman misunderstands on at least three accounts: (1) as she fails to give Jesus a drink, not realising his status and power to give in verse nine; (2) in verse eleven as she fails to see that the water of which Jesus speaks is not to be found at the bottom of a well; and (3) in verse fifteen she fails to see the spiritual significance of the promised water, regarding it as more of a magical substance to quench actual thirst.

At the point where the misunderstanding becomes tedious and inescapable, Jesus intervenes with a sign that could show who he truly is, he tells the woman of her marital status, something an ordinary traveller would not have known. This intervention is a parallel with the scar and the bed of Odysseus and the messenger of Menelaus, something which is suddenly brought into the conversation and which should end the misunderstanding. In each case above of the scene in Greek literature, this intervention is a fool-proof way to end ambiguity. In the one conversation noted above (between Helen and Teucer) where there was no intervention there was no recognition. This formula is undermined in John (ch. 4) as the intervention does not provide clarity. The woman claims that Jesus is a prophet as a response to the intervention, but this is by no means recognition of Jesus' true identity. When the woman mentions the coming of the Messiah (v. 25), she does not make the connection between him and Jesus. Moreover, the woman leaves the conversation without a real idea of who Jesus is. Though he has told her that he is the Messiah she is still able to ask the villagers 'surely he is not the Christ?' (v. 29).

This enduring confusion, upon which the intervention formula has failed to act, stresses the absolute failure of the woman to recognise Jesus as indicative of the general failure of humanity to recognise him. This is something stressed right from the prologue of the gospel, 'He (the Word) was in the world, and the world came to be through him, and the world did not know him. He came into his own, and his own did not receive him.'<sup>31</sup>

This idea of transcendence of divine interaction with the world would have sounded similar to the Euripidean chorus noted above. Both stress human failure and ignorance in the face of the divine as well as divine mastery over what has been created. In the case of the prologue quoted here, this is expressed in terms of the Word's role in creation and his possession of it. Having read the prologue before the conversation in chapter four, the Hellenic reader could well see the similarity and be expecting type-scenes from the dramatic tradition. The failure of the mistaken identity scene to produce correct knowledge of who Jesus is shows the reader that the sense of hidden reality is even greater in John's Gospel and leads them to regard the absolute transcendence of the divine Christ over sinful humanity.

This stress upon the Lord Jesus' transcendent personality reflects the similar type-scene reading by Eslinger. This may show that the meaning of the text is able to resist some of the assumptions and prejudices with which its readers approach the text. Having the wrong cultural background need not be a barrier to a reader perceiving the clear and intended meaning of the Bible. We must have a profound confidence that the word of God really does yield knowledge of everlasting life to any who would come to it.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St John*, (London: John Murray, 1887), p. 67, e.g. Luke 7:37.ff. & John 11:21.ff.
2. See R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John: Vol I*, trans. K. Smith. (Berlin: Herder & Herder, 1967), pp. 423-5; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1967), pp. 190-204 & F. M. Braun, *Jean le Théologien: Les Grandes*



*Traditions D'Israël et L'accord des Écritures selon le Quatrième Évangile* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1964). pp. 3-4.

3. E. Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1-6*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 217-31.
4. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (USA: Basic Books, 1981), p. 47.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-56.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
8. See C. M. Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman," in *NTS* 26, 1980: 337; P. D. Duke, *Irony in the Forth Gospel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), p.101; R. G. Machini, *Her Testimony is True: Women as Witnesses According to John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 119; L. Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well: Jesus, the Reader and Reader-Response Criticism," *Journal of Literature & Theology*: Vol. 1, No. 2: 167-88.
9. For example see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John*. (TX: Word Books Pub., 1987), pp. 58-66; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), pp. 214-32; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (Grands Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp.179-81. Lindars notes that there are some similarities between the pentateuchal scenes and the episode of Jesus with the Samaritan Woman, though he suggests that this is a meaningless coincidence.
10. John 3:29, 'bride', 'bridegroom', etc.
11. Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman," pp. 338-42.
12. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, p. 180.
13. Eslinger claims that this is essential as the text is primarily a rhetorical text. p.167
14. *Ibid.*, p.169.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Prov. 5:15-16, 'Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets?' ESV
17. Eslinger, "The Wooing," pp. 176-7.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
20. *Ibid.*, p.168. This is Eslinger's explanation of what he otherwise sees as a gap in the logic of the conversation, Jesus' sudden request to meet the Woman's husband, following their conversation about water.
21. *Ibid.*, p.175.
22. I discuss this aspect of the biblical text in greater depth in 'The dead letter? Psalm 119 and the spirituality of the Bible in the local church' *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol.

81, No. 2, 2009.

23. Duke, *Irony in the Forth Gospel*, p.100. Duke notes a similarity between the ironic scene of mistaken identity in Greek literature and the episode of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman but does not attempt a reading along these lines. Beasley-Murray (p. 59) suggests that John 4:39-42, the response of the Samaritan villagers to Jesus, functions like the chorus of a Greek play, taking a step back to comment on events.
23. Duke, *Irony in the Forth Gospel*, p.100
24. Euripides, *Helen*. 70-155
25. *Ibid.*, 700-705.
26. See also Euripides' *Iphigenia in Taurica* 769, in which Iphigenia fails to recognise her brother Orestes until she commands him to take a letter 'to Orestes, child of Agamemnon', receiving the reply 'O gods!'. Euripides' *Electra* 570 also contains the interruption device; here an old man enters the scene helping Electra to recognise Orestes her brother. See also Sophocles, *Electra*. 1115 for another example. Here the lack of recognition comes to an end when a fake casket containing Orestes' ashes appears and Orestes notices his sister's grief.
27. Euripides, *Helen*, 1688 ff.
28. John 4:3
29. John 4:9-15
30. John 1:10-11