

Jesus Meets the Samaritan Woman: Discovering Christian Memory and Identity

Israel Rosenfield² writes that identity “is the brain’s abstraction of the totality of our ‘memories’ and ‘experiences’” and is therefore created and reconstructed in relation to others.³ In this respect, Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman provides a variety of individual and collective memories which are recalled through the experience of the encounter with Christ as new experiences and relationships are formed or proposed.⁴

Memory seems to lie at the interface of the material and the immaterial. It is known first and foremost through experience, but has an impact which is perceptible. It is influenced by, and influences human relationships and behaviour. These qualities are in common with Christian spirituality. In

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² Israel Rosenfield (1939-) is an author who writes extensively on neurosciences. He has a background in mathematics and medicine but is also recognised for his contributions in the arts sector.

³ Israel Rosenfield, “Memory and Identity,” *New Literary History: Narratives of Literature, the Arts, and Memory*, 26/1 (1995): 197-203. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057275>.

⁴ Through her encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman experiences an amicable way of relating with a man and a Jew. She also returns to relate with her townspeople. The disciples are challenged when seeing Jesus relate to her, and are then made witness to the Samaritans who come out of their city to meet Jesus. Jesus also introduces another way of relating when speaking of the sower and the reaper as will be discussed further on.

Christianity, memory has been subject to study and reflection since the first centuries of Christian faith.⁵ Memory is important both as a capacity for the individual, as well as a collective faculty. In the text chosen (Jn 4:1-42) both types of memories are referred to: the Samaritan woman is brought to recall her marital history (Jn 4:16-18): reference to Jacob as the father common to both Jews and Samaritans (Jn 4:12) and the disputes between Samaritans and Jews (Jn 4:20) recall collective memories which still had an impact on the scene presented (Jn 4:9):⁶ Jesus' presence heals both the Samaritan woman's individual memory and the rift between his disciples and the woman's fellow citizens, creating a new experience and a new 'memory' as the Samaritans ask him to stay on (Jn 4:40).

Within the Church the concept and function of memory have been debated and explored over the centuries. Augustine (354-430) and other Fathers of the Church spoke about the memory of the actions of God and Christ, and the memory of God's graces and mercy. Augustine was particularly influential in the study of memory in Christianity. He related the memory of the individual to the original source of the spirit, wherein the image of God lay. In keeping in touch with the memory of the true self, the person can then remain in touch with the light, keeping out of darkness.⁷ Hugues de Rouen (d. 730) considered memory as a faculty which made it possible for the Christian to meditate on God's work in the history of salvation.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) downplayed the Augustinian view which related memory to the spirit and focused rather on the role memory of memory within the intellect. His contemporary Bonaventure (1221-1274) maintained the Augustinian view connecting memory to the spirit. For Bonaventure, when God became the object of the memory, the person could glorify and proclaim him as it became filled with God's presence and salvific actions.⁸

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) also related memory to the spirit. He spoke about the union which develops as the memory becomes purified from that which separates the soul from God. Through this poverty of spirit, and in being filled with hope, the soul detaches itself from earthly goods to attain glory, in

⁵ Aimé Solignac, "Mémoire - Au Moyen Age," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 10, eds. Mancel Viller et al. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), 1001.

⁶ Incidences recorded in the Old Testament which are related to the locations near Jacob's well are described in further detail below.

⁷ Graziano Giuseppe Pesenti, "Memoria," *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, vol. 2, ed. Ermanno Ancilli (Roma: Città Nuova, 1990), 1577. Solignac, "Mémoire," 999-1000.

⁸ Solignac, "Mémoire," 1000.

union with God.⁹ In the chosen text, an analogy to this is found in the Samaritan woman leaving her water jar behind as she goes back to the city (Jn 4:28) after Jesus revealed himself to her.

Memory is Intimately Related to Time and Tradition

Memory relates the past to the present, and commits the present to the past.¹⁰ The preservation and recollection of memories can also have an impact on the individual, in the re-reading of history, and in the making of the future.¹¹ Memories are influenced by, and influence society, behaviour, and relationships.¹² In this respect, memories expressed through tradition permit the transmission of faith and of the memory of salvation through Christian history, hence building the identity of the Christian.

In John 4:1-42 the scene surrounding Jacob's well forms a backdrop in which tradition and history outline the discourse of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. Biblical scholars identify Sychar, the town mentioned in John 4, either with Shechem,¹³ or Askar.¹⁴ Both are close to Mt Gerizim, Mt Ebal and the Oak of Moreh,¹⁵ sites related to God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants; sites which recall the "birth" of a nation and the institution of an identity related to land and law - the products of land providing material support and the law providing the social and moral structure for the new people. These mountains also recall the conflict between Jews and Samaritans and issues on worship¹⁶

⁹ Ibid., 1002; G. G. Pesenti, "Memoria," in *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, vol. 2, ed. Ermanno Ancilli (Roma: Città Nuova, 1990): 1577.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago/London: Chicago Press, 1983), 8.

¹¹ Pesenti, "Memoria," 1576; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1, 3.

¹² Pesenti, "Memoria," 1577.

¹³ Brown and Coloe hold that Sychar is a corruption of the name Shechem, a town mentioned in other parts of the Old Testament (Gen 12:6; Deut 11:29, 27:4-28:69; Jos 24:25-28) and situated within walking distance of Jacob's well. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII, Anchor Bible 29 (New York: Yale University Press, 1966), 169; Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2001), 91 n. 22.

¹⁴ Sychar is identified with Askar a modern-day village situated close to the site believed to be Jacob's well. See Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, 91, n. 22.

¹⁵ Shechem is mentioned in relation to the Oak of Moreh and Abram in Gen 12:6.

¹⁶ After the Jews' return from the Babylonian exile, Samaritans had impeded Jews from rebuilding the Temple at Jerusalem, whilst in 128 BC the Jewish high priest John Hyrcanus, had burned the Samaritan temple at Gerizim. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII, 170; Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, 87, n. 8; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, trans.

which are specifically brought up by the evangelist, in the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:20).

Whereas the backdrop mentioned above describes the beginning of a relationship of the people with God based on land and law, Jacob's well carries with it implications of another stage of Israel's relationship with God. In the Old Testament wells were linked to marriage covenants.¹⁷ This reflects a theme which recurs in the Old Testament, that of God as the bridegroom/husband, and of Israel as the bride. This type of relationship implies a deeper and more mature form of interaction than the one mentioned above.¹⁸ The theme of marriage also brings with it the idea of a union which can procreate and give new life.

The narrative elements highlighted above can be transposed for the Christian today to reflect on significant aspects in their identity. This scene provides an encounter with Christ situated in the past through the memories that the site provides. Likewise, for the Christian today, identity is inevitably linked to and rooted in the past. It is linked to the distant past - to the same covenants and history of salvation portrayed in this scene. It is also linked to the more recent past, which events and memories are challenging the Christian identity today.

Memories of the Distant Past

Reading of the Sacred Scriptures allows the Christian to commemorate the distant past not only as a narrative of Salvation but especially as the Word of God through which the covenants and God's love for his people are being relived. In the preface to *Dei Verbum*, the Word of God is referred to as: "divine revelation and how it is handed on, so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe, by believing it may hope, and by hoping it may love."¹⁹ In John 21 the Beloved Disciple - who had witnessed and acknowledged God's love for him - becomes himself a witness, and his writing "remains" (μένειν).²⁰ In and

Kevin Smyth (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 425.

¹⁷ Gen 24:11; 29:2; Exod 2:15-22. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII, 170.

¹⁸ The progression in the relationship with God is also seen from chapter 3 to chapter 4 in John's gospel. From the subjunctive mood, whereby the action - to be "born anew" (Jn 3:3) - though expected is not considered an objective fact, the author changes to the indicative in chapter 4 - "If you knew the gift of God ... you would have asked him" (Jn 4:10) whereby Jesus states it as an existing fact.

¹⁹ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 18 November 1965, 1, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

²⁰ Jn 21:23-24.

through the writing of John and the other authors of the Sacred Scriptures, divine revelation is still handed on that the Christian may believe. The “living water” is still being passed on to the Christian today. And that “living water” can still transform the human chatter (λαλία) into an experience of the Logos (λόγος), similar to the way in which the Samaritan woman’s words were transformed as she shared the revelation of Christ.

The Christian, who listens to or reads the Word of God, can remember God’s plan of salvation as it is unfurled in the Old Testament. Through the New Testament Jesus’ life and actions are recalled: Jesus Christ being “both mediator and the fullness of all revelation.”²¹ And Christians continue to listen to God’s word today “so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.”²² Through hearing the Word, therefore, the Christian can re-live the experience of the Samaritan woman at the well as she was led from the life-giving source left by Jacob to the everlasting life offered by Jesus.

Recent Past - Acknowledging Truth About the Self

The recent past is exemplified in this biblical pericope in what is recalled “at the surface” of Jacob’s well, namely the woman’s marital history (Jn 4:17,18) and the hostility between the Samaritans and the Jews (Jn 4:9). Jesus does not reprimand the woman, nor does he exhort that she sins no more as he does in other encounters in the same gospel (Jn 5:14; 8:11). He simply acknowledges the truth. And he does the same when she brings up the issue of worship between the Samaritans and the Jews (Jn 4:22). Acknowledging this truth seems to allow the woman to move on in her growing faith in Jesus, and in her personal life.

The shift of dialogue from the woman’s personal past to the issue of worship is interpreted by some biblical exegetes as an attempt by the woman to move the topic of conversation away from her unsavoury past.²³ Others see it as part of a process showing her growth in faith and understanding of Jesus’ identity.²⁴

²¹ *Dei Verbum*, 2; Jn 4:26.

²² *DV* 2.

²³ Hoskyn’s interpretation is mentioned by Schnackenburg as giving this view. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, 434.

²⁴ In her thesis Mary Coloe argues that there is a play on the meaning of the term “baal” (Jn 4:16-18) which is used to denote both god and “husband” (Aramaic). The six husbands - five previous and the current one - are compared to the six jars mentioned in the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:6) and said to represent the lack of perfection in Samaritan worship of “inadequate gods.” So the shift in dialogue from that of husbands (baalim) to worship is seen as a positive shift in the dialogue reflecting the woman’s growing perception of Jesus’ identity. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, 99.

Diarmuid Mc Gann explains this process from a Jungian perspective. His interpretation is that Jesus brings the woman to face her personal past, and then moves her on to discover the core of her being:

Jesus ... activates her memory in the dialogue, leading her out of forgetfulness of her elusive and painful past. He remembers with her so that by calling her from forgetfulness he can trigger in her the much deeper memory of who she is before God. He enables her to tie into something larger than either the forgetfulness of her personal past or the painful memory of her personal life. That is why the conversation can end up focused on the future.²⁵

The Christian's ability to tie into this identity allows one to discover the truth about God and about oneself. When the Christian recovers his or her true image and likeness of God one draws sustenance from that which is no longer limited to earthly needs but gives "eternal life" (Jn 4:14). This recalls Augustine's view of the relationship of the Christian with the initial memory of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, which keeps them on the right path.²⁶ John Paul II, in his book *Memory and Identity*²⁷ writes that for the believer the origins of identity are found in the account of Creation in the book of Genesis (Gen 1:26-27) when God himself "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen 2:7).²⁸

John Paul II speaks about the creation of the human person in this account as being different from that of the rest of creation. For the rest of creation God says: "Let there be ..." whereas in the creation of man God says: "Let us make man ..." (Gen 1:26). The creation of man involves a "Trinitarian consultation" he says.²⁹ For the believer, the roots of their identity lie in the relationship between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, a relationship which God desires to share. This desire to share is seen in John 4 in Jesus' offering of the gift and "living water" and the "harvest," for which "sower and reaper rejoice together."³⁰ Although Jesus is

²⁵ Diarmuid Mc Gann, *Journeying Within Transcendence: The Gospel of John Through a Jungian Perspective* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), 56.

²⁶ See Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. E. M. Blaiklock (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), 237-266. See also Books 10 and 11 of *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Personal Reflections* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 89-99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Jn 4:38; See Psalm 126:6.

at the centre of the encounter in John 4, he extends the relationship to include the Holy Spirit and God the Father.³¹

The Christian too, through his encounter with Christ can come to know God in whose image and likeness we are created, and thus discover this deep-rooted identity. Paul Lamarche speaks of two truths which this theme can reveal about the person's Christian identity.³² In recognising that one is created in the image and likeness of God the person comes to realise the qualities which give the Christian the identity of "a child of God": a direct link with God which affords immortality. As a consequence of this link there is a spiritual aspect in a person's identity which calls the Christian to transcend earthly matters and look towards the eschaton. In chapter 4 of John's gospel the invitation to discover one's spiritual identity is seen when Jesus shifts the conversation to living water and spiritual food.³³

On the other hand, the limitations which separate God and the human person are also revealed when humanity comes face to face with God and the reality of having originally been created in his image and likeness. In the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, the first revelation she receives after asking for the gift of living water is about herself (Jn 4:17). She comes to realise how her present situation lies so far from the truth.

Christ lies between these two truths. He unites them both, by throwing Light, showing the truth by being the Truth, and becoming the Way³⁴ for her (and the Christian) to discover the identity which gives eternal life (Jn 4:14).

The awareness brought about by acknowledging these two truths confronts the person with another truth - that of God's omnipotence - which continues to define the identity of the believer through his or her relationship with God. In her encounter with Jesus, the Samaritan woman questions Jesus' identity twice: "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" (Jn 4:12) and "Can this be the Christ?" (Jn 4:29). In her search to satisfy her insatiable thirst (Jn 4:15), she was

³¹ Most exegetes agree that the gift of God refers to the Holy Spirit or to the Spirit of God which is given by Jesus. See Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, 431. In Jn 7:37-39 the evangelist directly relates the "rivers of living water" to the Spirit. In Jn 4 Jesus refers to God the Father when speaking about worship (Jn 4:23) and doing the will of the one who sent him (Jn 4:34).

³² Paul Lamarche, "Image and Ressemblance," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 7, eds. Marcel Viller et al. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971), 1402-1403.

³³ Jn 4:14. 32.

³⁴ See Jn 8:12; 14:6.

challenged to let go of the image she had of father and messiah³⁵ to discover the true identity of God through her encounter with the living God.

In his *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Ratzinger speaks of the apostasy of the Israelites in the desert when they erected a golden calf for worship while Moses was on Mt Sinai (Exod 32:1), and identifies two reasons for this being a departure from their God-given identity. The first reason was that the people could not cope with what they did not see and therefore created a cult to bring God to them when they desired it, rather than waited for God to become present. The second reason was that the cult, being “self-generated,” lacked the true spirit from which true worship could arise. Without the true spirit worship became “banal self-gratification” and “There is no experience of that liberation which always takes place when man encounters the living God.”³⁶ Christ makes himself present at Jacob’s well. That encounter liberates the Samaritan woman from the past and introduces her to an experience of true worship as she starts to relate with the true God.

As the Samaritan woman engages in dialogue a re-ordering of roles within the relationship is seen. She moves from calling Jesus a Jew to addressing him with a more respectful “Sir” (Jn 4:11),³⁷ recognising him as prophet and eventually considering the possibility of him being the Messiah. Whilst Jesus overcomes barriers by approaching the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:9, 11, 27), boundaries are redefined as Jesus is given a more respected space and the woman becomes more mindful and respectful of her reality.³⁸ The identity of the woman and of the Christian are defined when one meets God and relates humbly to him in his greatness and omnipotence.

³⁵ In Jn 4:25 the evangelist explains the word “Messiah” (*māšīah*) by the Greek term “christos” (Χριστός). In verse 29 the Samaritan woman herself refers to Jesus as “Christ.”

³⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 22-23.

³⁷ In addressing Jesus “Sir” (Kyrie) the woman is giving Jesus more respect and consequently she is placing herself in a humbler space in relation to him. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, 428; Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII, 170.

³⁸ “As he [Jesus] speaks there is a gradual unveiling of who he is. As she speaks there is a gradual acceptance of who she is. This acceptance of who she is corresponds to an expansion of vision, and the interesting fact is that as she accepts herself more she comes to see him more and more in his own uniqueness.” Mc Gann, *Journeying Within Transcendence*, 55.

Collective Memory and Tradition

In the previous sections the memory and identity of the individual were seen in the context of John 4. The discovery of the “original” identity through the encounter with Christ, together with the changes this can bring were also discussed. The process of moving from past painful memories into the future becomes more complex, however, when involving collective memories, especially those spanning generations. Hans Urs von Balthasar writes about the principle of tradition for Catholics which does not allow them to put aside or dissociate themselves from the past:

The same Church to which he submits himself has done, or allowed to be done, things that can no longer be justified today. One can put this down to the evolution of human awareness, and yet how many were the entanglements between the temporal and spiritual! The Christian himself is enmeshed in this same tradition, whether he likes it or not.³⁹

The encounter with the Samaritan woman provides hope in this aspect. The issue of the place of worship, which carried with it many painful memories for both Jews and Samaritans is placed within a new perspective by Jesus (Jn 4:21-24). His presence takes it to another level - the spiritual level which encompasses all “true worshipers” (Jn 4:23). He does not repudiate the past but introduces a deeper understanding of worship (Jn 4:23), which become possible with his incarnation when the spirit and truth of God are shown through his presence.⁴⁰ The presence of Christ transforms these memories even as they continue to form part of the identity of the persons involved. A “new” identity was gained through the encounter with and revelation of Christ. In the light of this biblical encounter, tradition and unsavoury memories in Church history can find new life when seen in the right spirit through an encounter with Christ who, whilst acknowledging the truth, shows mercy and not retribution.

Although at present the general society seems to be focusing more on the “sins” of the Church, the Christian identity is built on positive collective memories and rich traditions too. Hans Urs von Balthasar also writes: “he [the Christian] may be poor with his (spiritually) poor brothers, and yet he may not deny his own riches.”⁴¹ In this biblical pericope traditions represented by Jacob’s well remain a meeting place where the present meets the past to give life to the future. However,

³⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Who Is a Christian?* trans. Frank Davidson (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), 15-16.

⁴⁰ Jn 4:34; Matt 11:27; Lk 10:22.

⁴¹ Von Balthasar, *Who Is a Christian?*, 21.

as already discussed, the preservation and recollection of memories as well as the re-reading of history can be subject to influence by society and experience.⁴² The meeting with the Samaritan woman can provide a perspective on how to integrate memories and traditions genuinely. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman in her time and space, helps her recollect personal memories (Jn 4:16-19) and collective memories (Jn 4:12,20,22,25) while leading her to a new revelation based on the truth which is Christ himself (Jn 4:26).⁴³ The disposition to know the truth and the ability of the Samaritan woman to let go of old structures allow her to move on in her faith. In the development of their identity in faith Christians too are called to constantly search for the truth, discarding traditions which mislead from true faith. This requires a sifting of authentic and inauthentic traditions. Authentic traditions are based on the truth and are gained from the original source of the memory. In contrast, inauthentic traditions develop when based on memories which are distorted in perception or recollection.⁴⁴ For the Christian the memory of the original identity can be discovered in the encounter with God in whose image one was created and in moving on from knowledge and tradition to the revelation of being saved in and through Christ.

From Knowledge and Tradition to Revelation

Knowledge and tradition are limited sources of the spiritual life if they are allowed to become stagnant like the water in Jacob's well.⁴⁵ The water which Jesus offers is one which quenches all thirst and gives everlasting life (Jn 4:13-14). However, when the Samaritan woman asks to be given this gift Jesus leads her through a process of revelation which involves her openness and ability to change. In the chapter preceding the encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus meets Nicodemus, a fellow Jew. Nicodemus is called to let go of his

⁴² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 91-91.

⁴³ Ignace de la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus: The Passion and the Resurrection of Jesus According to John* (New York: St Paul Publication, 1989), 69, speaks of the "truth" in John as referring to the revelation of the divine plan of salvation, through the revelation of Jesus' presence and identity as Son of God.

⁴⁴ Marygrace Peters, "Tradition," *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (London: SCM Press, 2005), 622-623.

⁴⁵ When Jesus introduces "living water" the evangelist starts uses the term *phrear* (φρέαρ) for Jacob's well (Jn 4:11-12). This term is closer to "cistern" which implies water which is stagnant, in contrast to the living water offered by Jesus Christ, and fresh flowing water implied by the use of the term *pegè* (πηγή) to denote Jacob's well in the first part of this text. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII, 170.

Jewish understanding and be “born from above” (Jn 3:3). In both encounters, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are called to let go of old structures on which their source of life depended in order to discover deeper roots to their faith and spiritual identities. Though spirited in her dialogue the Samaritan woman demonstrates a poverty of spirit which is receptive to the gift which Jesus makes.⁴⁶ Nicodemus, on the other hand, finds it hard to submit to Jesus’ revelation and demands (Jn 3:2-7).⁴⁷ The increasing openness of the Samaritan woman culminates in Jesus’ revelation of his identity as Messiah (ἐγώ εἰμι) (Jn 4:26).

In his exegesis of this text, Brown notes the difference between the perception of the messiah for the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews expected an anointed king from the house of David who would restore to them the national identity related to earthly matters. The messiah for the Samaritans was more of a Moses-like prophet, who would lead his people to the promised land through adherence to the law of God.⁴⁸ One represented earthly power and self-sufficiency, the other a deeper relationship with a God who cares for, sustains and provides. As Brown comments, Jesus seems to ascribe to himself the definition of messiah more easily when given by a Samaritan woman.⁴⁹ This is relevant to this article as it reflects and further qualifies the identity of Christ on which is based that of the Christian.

Through her encounter, the Samaritan woman receives Jesus’ revelation as messiah or saviour in her life not on a physical or earthly plane but on a spiritual level.⁵⁰ This revelation leads to another revelation: that true worshippers “worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23), “neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (Jn 4:23, 21). Although the emphasis is on the spirit and worship is freed from its earthly forms, the role of Israel in the history of salvation is not denied by the evangelist. Rather it is presented as a stage in the process.⁵¹ John 4:22 can be considered as a transition from the announcement of “the hour”

⁴⁶ This disposition recalls the purification of memory described by St. John of the Cross which allows one to let go of that which hinders perfect union with God and be open to the revelation of God.

⁴⁷ Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, 364.

⁴⁸ Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII, 172-173.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ The gift of living water Jesus offers quenches the spiritual thirst and leads to eternal life (Jn 4:14).

⁵¹ The evangelist does not refute the spiritual heritage of Judaism as he says “salvation is from the Jews” (Jn 4:22). R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1998), 142; Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII, 172.

(Jn 4:21) to its actualization in the person of Jesus Christ (Jn 4:23) in whom the Spirit of God took earthly form.⁵² In the next section it will be discussed how this revelation is linked to salvation and truth which, whilst coming through the spirit, involves and is manifested through Christ's presence.

Jesus' Identity - Revelation and Truth

The phrase "I am" (ἐγὼ εἰμι) carries a solemn and sacred implication rooted in its use in the Old Testament. In this text it is found between the two scenes, like a hinge in a diptych. With the revelation of Christ as God/Messiah there is a shift in the scene. As the woman exits the scene the disciples take on the dialogue (Jn 4:31-38). Unlike the Samaritan woman who met him unexpectedly, these disciples know and believe in Jesus. They have already been called and are following him.⁵³ The topic of the dialogue also changes from thirst and water to nourishment or food, and harvest - from that which gives life to what nourishes and sustains it. This scene therefore allows for a deepening in the understanding of Jesus Christ's and the Christian identity.

The link with the past continues through the language used. The word "Messiah," derived from a Hebrew form *māšīah*, was used in the Old Testament to mean "anointed" or "anointed one"; the act of anointing indicating God who entrusted a mission to a specific person or people.⁵⁴ At the end of the first scene (Jn 4:26) Jesus accepts the title of Messiah from the Samaritan woman. In the second scene he elaborates on the mission implied by the title (Jn 4:34). Rudolf Schnackenburg describes the food or nourishment (βρῶσις) as a metaphor used by Jesus to denote his readiness to do God's will. He writes that here the nourishment is not a gift from God or a source of food which comes from the Father, but rather an inner impetus of being who he was meant to be - that which nourished his identity: "... to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" (Jn 4:34). Through his presence but also in his being, Jesus reveals and realizes God's plan of salvation.

⁵² Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, 436.

⁵³ In Jn 4:2 the evangelist specifies that the disciples were baptising people. In this gospel, the term "disciples" (μαθηταί) is used to refer to the regular followers of Jesus. The term "apostle" was used in the post-resurrectional period. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII, 98.

⁵⁴ Wolter Rose, "Messiah (māšīah)," *Dictionary of the OT Pentateuch: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2003), 565.

Revelation of the person and identity of Jesus Christ is a central theme in the gospel of John.⁵⁵ It is also fundamental for the Christian because such identity depends on it. In verse 23 Jesus says that true worshipers must worship in spirit and truth. De la Potterie defines the word “truth” as used in John’s gospel as “the revelation of the divine plan of salvation.”⁵⁶ This truth is revealed in the person of Jesus Son of God who, in doing his Father’s will, realizes God’s plan of salvation. In the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, Jesus reveals himself as Saviour (Jn 4:14) but also as God (Jn 4:26). He reveals his identity and also his mission. And in accepting this revelation and truth the believer can become a true worshiper and grow in their relationship with God.

This biblical pericope affords a study on the process of growth that the relationship between God and the believer can undergo, with a consequent development in the identity of the latter. This changing identity indicates the dynamic quality of the process of faith which requires that the Christian believer is open to change and to challenges which they may encounter unexpectedly. Jesus’ disciples are faced with such a challenge when they return. They not only find Jesus going against the norms by talking to a Samaritan woman (Jn 4:27) but he also refuses their offer of food (Jn 4:31-33). The next section will look at the changes that Jesus proposes to his disciples and the change to their identity that this implies.

From Discipleship to Apostleship

Through his discourse in the second scene Jesus continues to elaborate on the relationship that his disciples are to have with God the Father (Jn 4:36) and their role within the plan of salvation (Jn 4:38). He reminds them of their mission: “I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour” (Jn 4:38).

The act of “being sent” (ἀπέστειλα) implies a development in the disciples’ identity. The disciples who were following Jesus are no longer simply with him in order to be instructed. They become involved in Christ’s mission (Jn 4:38). Their identity hence develops from one of discipleship to one which is apostolic (Jn 4:38).⁵⁷ They become actively involved in his mission of salvation.

⁵⁵ Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, 507.

⁵⁶ De la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus*, 69.

⁵⁷ “Disciple” being the “one who learns” whilst “apostolic” here refers to the followers of Christ who are sent by him just as he was sent by the Father (Jn 20:21). Thomas P. Rausch, “Discipleship,” *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (London, 2005), 249; Gemma Simmonds, “Apostolic Spirituality,” *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (London, SCM Press, 2005), 119.

This development in identity is obtained through Christ who lives out his own identity as the one sent by the Father and who then sends his followers (Jn 20:21). Through Jesus as the truth, the disciples are being invited to take their relationship with God to another level: a level which connects them with God the Father.⁵⁸ In this biblical scene one can see the different levels of identity: from the Samaritan woman who represents the believer's initial meeting with Christ becoming open to the gift of God, the revelation of her true self which is followed by Jesus' definition of the true worshiper and subsequently the description of the relationship with God the Father which was to become more direct in true worship. In the second scene this relationship becomes more intimate through sharing Jesus' "food" of doing God's will. Thus, "being sent" can become that which nourishes the identity of Christ's disciples too. This indicates an aspect inherent in the identity of the Christian - that belief in Christ cannot be held within oneself. In this respect, the reaction of the Samaritan woman to Jesus' revelation of his divinity and the disciples' reaction will be explored in the next section.

When Revelation Spreads -Formation of Communion

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well begins between two individuals and concludes with Jesus' disciples and the Samaritan townspeople meeting at the well of their common ancestor. On receiving the revelation of Christ and acknowledging him as Messiah, the Samaritan woman "left her water jar and went into the city" (Jn 4:28). That which is material - clay jar and well-water - is replaced by the spiritual. The person herself becomes the "container" (temple) of the spiritual source of everlasting water, which flows over to reach others: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?' They went out of the city and were coming to him" (Jn 4:29-30).

Christ's revelation and belief in him leads to a transformation in the Samaritan woman which changes her behaviour in relation to her townspeople. She returns to share the good news of Jesus' revelation. In her book, *Holiness*, Donna Orsuto speaks about how belief in Jesus Christ implies a conversion and that this new vision of oneself "affects our distinctive behaviour in the world."⁵⁹ This same behaviour spreads the good news (Jn 4:29) and can lead to more conversions (Jn 4:39). In this way true Christians become the "living stones" forming a temple where God has chosen to dwell (cf. Jn 4:40) and where "the true worshipers will

⁵⁸ See Jn 13:20.

⁵⁹ Donna Orsuto, *Holiness* (London: Continuum, 2006), 37.

worship the Father in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23). This "temple" goes beyond physical structures or individual merit: it enhances them. It goes beyond space and time: it unites them. It goes beyond social, historical and biological structures: it nourishes them. Thus, in this way God can become "Incarnate": that which was started by Jesus' coming and walking in this world can be continued by his disciples, just as what started with Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman spread to include the other Samaritans and his disciples.

An interesting factor in this scene is that Jesus' disciples and the Samaritans meet at Jacob's well - their common father. Jacob's well is referred to in the text as a source of nourishment and life for family, livestock and subsequent generations (Jn 4:12). John Paul II relates the concept of "father" (*pater*) to "fatherland" (*patria*) which, he says, "refers to the land, the territory, but more importantly, the concept of *patria* includes the values and the spiritual content that go to make up the culture of a given nation."⁶⁰ Despite the animosity between Samaritans and Jews expressed in the beginning of the encounter (Jn 4:9), Jacob's well offers a meeting point through a common father. The water which this well provides has limitations, however. "Jesus said to her 'Everyone who drinks from this water will thirst again'" (Jn 4:13). Jesus propels the disciples and Samaritans onto their journey of faith. He introduces another source of water which gives everlasting life (Jn 4:14). He also qualifies another relationship with the "Father" - with God the Father - through the dialogue on worship in the first scene (Jn 4:23,24) and on the harvest in the second scene (Jn 4:34-38). The past, biological and historical is not to be dismissed but Jesus brings in the new, building on what is already present. This gives an image of a dynamic Church building on the past, uniting through flaws in the present and projecting into the future, with Jesus as the cornerstone uniting all who are called to believe in him.

This dynamic of God entering a life, transforming the person and catapulting the believer into a life-giving future can be glimpsed as far back as the personal history of Abraham, the father of the Jewish people.⁶¹ Abraham's faith in God and in his promises leads him to take on a new identity which surpasses his limitations and spreads to form a communion of God's people. In John 4 the communion of people around Jesus remains diverse. Jesus does not appeal to the

⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, 66.

⁶¹ When Abraham welcomed God's presence in his life his identity became linked to the future: "All families will be blessed in you" (Gen 12:3; 18:18); "You will have a son" (Gen 18:10); "I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies" (Gen 22:17).

Samaritans to follow him - he stays with them. Likewise nowadays, Christians are a varied group of individuals who retain their particular character and their diverse cultural and social ways.⁶² What unites them is the encounter with God through Christ: an encounter which takes one to the spiritual realm, where their identity as God's adopted children saved by Christ, becomes common to all. This diversity within communion will be discussed in the next section in relation to the text.

Diversity in Communion

An intriguing theory mentioned by both Brown and Schnackenburg interprets John chapter 4 in the context of the conversion of Samaria as narrated in Acts chapter 8.⁶³ In this mission, Philip was "the sower" of Christian faith (Acts 8:5), whilst Peter and John had gone down to confer the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-16). Philip, who was a Hellenist, presumably opposed worship at the Jerusalem temple whilst some in the church of Jerusalem wanted the Samaritans to shift their loyalty to Jerusalem as part of their embracing the Christian faith. This background would explain the distinction made between the sower and the reaper in John 4:37, and would also include the issue of place of worship mentioned in John 4:19.⁶⁴

In the light of this theory, the theme of sower and reaper may reflect the different identities/roles that Christians hold within the Church. This recalls St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one" (1 Cor 12:4-6) and "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor 12:12). Brown also quotes 1 Corinthians 3:6 in relation to this text: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."⁶⁵ This perspective takes the sower and the reaper both as disciples and places them in relationship to God and to God's spirit; a relationship which gives life.

With the relationship of the sower and the reaper as described by Jesus in this text the identity of the Christian no longer stands alone, describing individuals, but differentiates to form disciples having different roles which complement

⁶² John Bowden, *Christianity: The Complete Guide* (London: Continuum, 2005), viii.

⁶³ Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 1, 453.

⁶⁴ Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, I-XII, 184.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

each other (Rom 12:4-7). This may be compared to the physical body which while starting as one cell divides into cells all containing the same DNA. These cells then differentiate to form organs, each having a unique identity. This same identity finds fulfilment in relation to the whole: the hands have a similar “identity” but differ in being right or left, are different from the foot whilst being complementary to it.

Taken from this perspective, Jesus transforms the idea of “individual jobs” presented by the proverb (Jn 4:37), and introduces a new order which whilst preserving the individual identity, goes beyond it to make one whole, united in and through God’s spirit. All parts, united in God, are then called to rejoice as one in celebrating the fruit of the harvest (Jn 4:36).

The Harvest - Sower and Reaper Rejoice Together

In the second scene Jesus introduces a new perspective to the saying: “One sows and another reaps” (Jn 4:37). In the Old Testament this saying is used in a negative way often implying that life is unfair and that the sower may not live to enjoy the harvest (Deut 20:6, 28:30; Job 31:8; Mic 6:15). It is not clear whether the sower in the text refers to Jesus, God the Father or others who may have prepared the Samaritans before they met Jesus.⁶⁶ However, if it is taken to refer to or include God the Father, it portrays a relationship with God which is nourishing and joyful.⁶⁷ Jesus Christ transforms the relationship between sower and reaper to one which is giving and sharing: the reaper is sent to harvest what he did not sow (Jn 4:38) and sower and reaper rejoice together with the harvest (Jn 4:36).

The relationship between sower and reaper is transformed from one of inequity to one of giving or sharing and to one which is nourishing and joyful.⁶⁸ The theme of joyful living and celebration has been reiterated by Pope Francis.⁶⁹ In *Evangelii Gaudium* he speaks of “going forth” which is a mission for the Christian.⁷⁰ It is this joyful living which arises from living in the spirit of God and from doing his will which evangelises and thus shares in the harvest. That

⁶⁶ Ibid., 183.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 1, 2, 24. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html; Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 126 (Vatican: Editrice Vaticana, 2016), 108.

⁷⁰ EG 20.

which is sown by God bears fruit which can be shared by all involved, giving rise to a true communion.

Finally, an evangelizing community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always. It celebrates every small victory, every step forward in the work of evangelization. Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness. The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving.⁷¹

Conclusion

Through the study of John 4:1-42 it was seen that Christian identity is not acquired in a one-time event (during baptism only) but involves a process in which memories are processed and experiences transformed to discover a deeper self in relation to God and to others.

The formation of Christian identity involves a personal encounter with God. Jesus is at the centre of this encounter. He meets the person in his space and is the one who initiates the exchange (dialogue). However, it requires an open disposition on the part of the individual and a readiness to engage in the “dialogue.” As the Christian identity develops one allows oneself to be transformed in one’s perception and behaviour - to move from that which is earthly to the “spirit and truth.” These characteristics can be seen in the Samaritan woman’s encounter with Christ.

The woman’s openness and desire to acquire what Jesus was offering - the gift of living water - brought her face to face with her truth as well as also with the revelation of who she was in front of God (in worship), even as Jesus reveals his identity to her and to the reader of the Gospel.

The relationship of memory with Christian identity was given particular importance in this article since the setting of the scene lends itself to remind the reader of the background which lay behind the two main “actors.” The covenants with God’s people lay the foundation of moral and legal behaviour and Jacob’s well was seen to remind one of another step in the developing relationship with God - one which involved a more mature interaction. These memories which still lie at the foundation of Christian identity were transformed in the presence of Jesus, who introduces a new relationship with God.

⁷¹ Ibid., 24.

In the first scene Jesus speaks of the true worshipers who are no longer tied to land or law but whose identity is created (animated) in spirit and truth. In the second scene Jesus elaborates on his identity as the one who is sent and who finds nourishment in doing the will of God. The identity of the disciples also develops from one in which they receive the “living water” as the Samaritan woman did, to one in which they too are sent and asked to participate in the mission of salvation - to reap the harvest. The characteristic joy accompanying community as typical to Christian identity are also seen.

One hopes that through the study of this theologically dense text, the identity of the Christian, starting from one’s relationship to the roots and developed through an encounter with Christ, might be discovered in a way which sheds light on challenges being faced by Christians today.

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