



Quaker Universalist Voice

John 4: Worship Translation Notes

by J.M. Spears

Worship is for All People at All Times and in All Places

The story known as “The Woman at the Well,” is found only in the Gospel of John (John 4:4-32). John is generally believed to have been written near the end of the first century CE.

This passage should be read as a short story about the universal need for right worship of the one God. Traditional interpretations focus on morality for women.

In the past, this story has been primarily interpreted from the patriarchal perspective of our culture. This perspective assumes that women are defined by their subordinate and dependent relation to men. These interpretations:

- **Acceptance by the ignorant:** In John 3, Nicodemus, the rabbi of Jerusalem, came to Jesus at night. This rabbi did not understand the message Jesus spoke, but an immoral Samaritan woman, who met Jesus in the full light of noon, and the peasants of Samaria, quickly accepted the message.
- **Grace to a prostitute:** Jesus chose not to pass moral judgment on an immoral woman, but instead showed acceptance of a prostitute and the woman’s growing faith.
- **Understanding by the lowly:** An immoral Samaritan woman unlike the disciples, understood that Jesus was the prophet-like-Moses that the Samaritans had been expecting.
- **Universal gospel:** Jesus intended the good-news message to be about the universal character of God’s plan of salvation (salvation) for all people – including the lowly, those not accepted, the marginalized, the moral, and the immoral people in society, and the Jews and non-Jews alike. All people can see and proclaim the rule of God.

These interpretations focus attention on verses 16, 17 and 18. While the story is at least 40 verses long, the author makes no statement about the morality of the Samaritan woman.

These interpretations divert attention from the central theme of this story, which is worship.

Pneuma, alethes, and aner:

The story hinges on the choice of words the translator chooses for three Greek terms.

For *pneuma*, a translator might choose wind, breath, spirit, air in motion, soul, specter, or frame of mind. For *alethes*, a translator might choose truthful, worthy of credit, veracity, to act truly or sincerely. The term *aner* can be used to mean not child, not female, not wife, a human being, an individual, or a spiritual being that is more than human and less than pure spirit.

In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, *pneuma*, *alethes*, and *aner* are translated as spirit, truth, and husband.

Water, air and food:

This translation of John helps the reader to assess questions about choosing s god to worship (John 4:16-22), where to worship (John 4:30), when to worship (John 4:23), and how to worship (John 4:34).

This story shows that Jesus revealed to the woman at the well the gift of the good life that is available to all people. To help her understand worship, the author tells the reader that spiritual life can be described using the imagery of water (John 4:14), air (John 4:23), and food (John 4:34), which are available to nurture the inner spiritual life. Just as physical life is dependent on physical water air, and food, the inner life is seen as dependent on the spiritual water, air, and food of worship.

The woman at the well asks for living (flowing, not stagnant) water. While discussing living water, Jesus asks the woman to declare the identity of her god (master), to say what rules her life. She says she has no master. Jesus tells her she is right for she has tried the five different gods the Samaritans call “master.” To receive the gift of flowing life, Jesus tells the woman a person must worship the god (master) who gives living water. Jesus asks the woman to discern which of the gods I her life could give her the living water she seeks.

The woman is not certain about which god to worship. She says she now worships the god of Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, and Rachel. But, Jesus reveals that the woman has not taken this God Yahweh, in reality, only in outward motions and only on specific occasions, in specific places. She does not worship God with every breath she takes. Jesus says that if she wants the living water that she seeks, she must worship the one true God in all of life.

The Samaritan woman then asks where people get life-giving water. She knows that the Jews say that spiritual life is found only in the temple in Jerusalem, while the Samaritans say it is only available on Mount Gerizim. A temple had been built on Mount Gerizim at the time of the schism between Jews and Samaritans. For Samaritans, this temple on Mount Gerizim was the “house of the Lord.” However, the Jews believed that the temple in Jerusalem was the “house of the Lord.”

Jesus answers the where question by saying that the source of the life-giving water is available everywhere, not only in Jerusalem and not only on Mount Gerizim. Like water, God's gift of life is found in every part of God's created order. The author of John says that spiritual water can be found wherever people exist. God is available everywhere. People identify their gods by the decisions they make about their time and resources, not where they go to worship.

Recognizing that the idea of God being everywhere, automatically raises other questions. Jesus moves the worship discussion from the where question to the questions of how to worship. Jesus tells the woman that to live as she wants to live, she must worship God in the same way she breathes- automatically, at all times, and in all places, in *pneuma*. Faith and action cannot be separated.

Pneuma:

One key to understanding this discussion of worship is the way the Greek word *pneuma* (Hebrew *ruah*) is translated. The Hebrew and Greek languages have vocabularies that are much smaller than that of the English language. Therefore, each Hebrew word and Greek word must represent more different ideas than any one English word. Because *pneuma* was used to translate *ruah*, the New Testament writers would have had the concepts of "breath of God," and "breath of life" in mind.

In the Nicodemus story, *pneuma* is translated as both *wind* and *spirit*. "What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of Spirit is spirit (*Pneuma* is *pneuma*)" (John 3:6) (The translators decide which words to capitalize.). "The wind (*pneuma*) blows where it chooses..." (John 3:8)

Alethes:

When Jesus' discussion with the woman turns to the topic of true worship, Jesus says that real worshipers will worship God in every breath (*pneuma*) and in reality or truth (*alethes*), in everything they do. True worship is more than going through the outward motions that are collectively identified as worship. True worship takes place in daily action, in the reality (truth) of daily life.

Basic Needs:

The author has used the most basic needs of all people in describing worship: water, air and food -drinking, breathing, and eating. All people worship, just as all people drink, breathe, and eat. Not to think about the what, where, and how of worship is as serious as not thinking about the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the food we eat. This use of the basic needs of all people emphasizes the fact that worship is an essential part of all human life.

Aner:

In addition to *pneuma* (breath) and *alethes* (reality), the translation of the Greek word *aner* is key to understanding this story.

The Greek word *aner* is traditionally translated as “husband” or “man” and interpreted in a story about an adulterous woman.

Translators have assumed that the woman had five husbands, or men, who were her masters. The term *master* is as accurate a translation as the term *husband*. The term *master* has been used in the Bible to mean both human and spiritual masters.

The word *aner* has a wide variety of meanings from which to choose an English equivalent. In this particular passage, *aner* is properly used to mean ‘a spiritual being that is more-than-human and less-than-Yahweh.’

Most definitions in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Kittle, ed. 1964, Vol. 1 p. 362), take the negative approach and describe what the word *aner* is not. For example, *aner* is not a mythic monster. It is not a woman. It is not a wife. It is not a eunuch. It is not a boy. Sometimes, *aner* designates someone with a specific function or job. This understanding has led to the mistaken assumption that, therefore, the word *aner* always means a male person.

However, the Theological Dictionary says that, for the most part, the word *aner* is used only to contrast it with “pure spirit,” or to show a contrast with flesh (body). Therefore, *aner* is a word that can also accurately be translated to mean ‘a spiritual being, but not a pure spirit.’

The evidence for the use of *aner* to mean a spiritual being, but not a pure spirit, is supported by 1) the way the word *aner* was used in other parts of the Gospel of John, 2) the way other New Testament writers used *aner* when meaning “a spiritual being’, and 3- the way *aner* was used in translating a variety of Hebrew words (especially ba’al) into the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). *Aner* here is not “husband”, but other gods who are less than the pure God.

Translators of the Bible have been scandalized by Jesus talking about worship with a Samaritan woman. Yet, a Samaritan woman is the person chosen to make the point about the universality of God. The woman at the well gives Jesus the opportunity to identify right worship as the universal need of all people, like water, air, and food or drinking, breathing, and eating are universal needs.

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well reveals the important gospel message that is lost to all, men and women alike, when it is mistranslated.

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Note: Unless otherwise noted, all scripture is quoted here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)