

Jesus' Principles of Breaking Barriers: A Reflection on John 4:3-42

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Abstract

This paper investigates Jesus' Principles of Breaking Barriers: A Reflection on John 4:3-42 as a pivot and principle for breaking barriers from biblical perspective. Worthy of note is the fact that there existed socio-ethnic barrier between the Jews and Samaria; gender barrier imposed by Jesus' androcentric culture and a moral barrier imposed by the Samaritan woman's assumed behaviour. This paper using hermeneutical theory of biblical interpretation and historical insight into this Johannine text brings to the fore that, the Jewish-Samaritan barrier had ethnic, religious and political undertones which made the Samaritans and Jews to see themselves as 'enemies'; the interaction with the Samaritan woman broke barriers and set a new agenda for relationship with 'inferior' gender and morally low in the human society. Herein exists principles of breaking barriers set by Jesus which are worthy of emulation in the twenty-first century which is plagued by socio-ethnic, religious, gender and moral barriers. **(151 Words)**

Introduction:

The world is full of barriers that prevent interaction between people on the basis of religion, ethnocentric, socio-economic, etc. reasons. Barrier is defined by different scholars as "a fence or other obstacle that prevents movement or access."¹ Miriam Webster further defines barrier as "something immaterial that impedes or separates."² The common features of barrier is that it impedes cross-barrier interaction between the opposing parties. This often results in the opposing parties claiming superiority over each other and may sometimes lead to hostility either overtly or covertly between the parties involve. Hence, it is rightly pointed out that "when two groups share that same perspective, the most likely outcome is conflict and a fight for dominance or social power."³ This was the situation between the Jews and the Samaritans in the days of Jesus Christ. This created ethno-religious and socio-political barriers between both communities. This to a great

extent hindered the flow of interactions between both parties. The same problem exist today at different levels between some communities in the world. Barriers are created on religious, political, ethnic, economic, etc. levels. The Fourth Gospel therefore presents us a picture of Jesus dealing with barriers in his interaction with the unnamed Samaritan woman. Jesus' interaction here went beyond ethno-religious level to that of socio-moral level in the sense that the woman in question was said to be a woman with low morality as presented in John 4:3-42.

In this narrative, using hermeneutics theory of biblical interpretation, this paper avers that Jesus broke down ethno-social, religious barriers between the Jews and the Samaritans on one level, gender barrier which was paramount in his androcentric culture on another level, but all these are not without dealing with moral barrier which was an issue in the Samaritan woman's life. Jesus hereby sets not only a paradigm to be followed but principles in breaking barriers between estranged communities worth emulating in the world which is highly separated by different types of barriers.

Background to John 4:3-42

The Samaritans and the Jewish Relationship: The city of Samaria was founded by King Omri of the northern kingdom of Israel in the first half of the ninth century B.C. and it became the capital of the northern kingdom until the Assyrian invasion destroyed it at about 722 B.C., deported the Israelites there and brought in pagans from "Babylon, Cuthah, Awwa, Hamath, and Seperwayim and settled them in the cities of Samaria" (2Kings 17:24). These new settlers intermarried with the few original settlers who were not taken into exile, and the result was mixed-blood descendants. Although these new dwellers and the mixed-blood inhabitants of Samaria decided to worship Yahweh, they continued in their old religious and ethical practices. This resulted in syncretism as the Old Testament points out that, "these nations worshiped the Lord, but also served their carved images; to this day their children and their children's children continue to do as their ancestors did." (2 Kings 17:41). After their return from captivity in 539 B.C., Samaria became the capital of a separate Persian province, and a gradual religious rift developed between them and the Jews. During the reign of King Josiah, he had brought back the people of Samaria into the control of Judah, but for a short time in the late 600's. When Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians, Samaria was established as a separate province again.

Lawrence Boadt points out that, "the evidence of the post-exilic books show that a strong animosity grew up between the returning exiles in Judah and the so-called Jews of the north."⁴

According to Ezra 4:1-6, the exiles refused to allow the Samaritans to partake in the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah 4 on the other hand shows how the Samaritans tried to prevent the rebuilding of the city wall through Samballat who was the governor of Samaria (see Neh 2:10, 19; 4, 6, etc.). Boadt further points out that, the hatred between the Jews and the Samaritan “was too great to be healed, and slowly but surely the two groups separated completely.”⁵ Worthy of note is the fact that religiously, the Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch as sacred, but refused to accept any other Old Testament book into their religious canon. Craig Keener strongly opines that “Samaritans were probably hellenized to a fair degree by the first century”⁶ and the antics of Simon in Acts 8:5 gives much credence to this. His claim to be ‘the great power of God’ points to that fact he adapted some popular religious motifs of the Hellenistic East. The Hellenistic nature of Samaritans, their ethnicity put together became the source of hostility between Jews and Samaritan which continued up till the time of Jesus as could be seen in Luke 9:52-56 and our text of consideration, Jn 4:3-42.

Two things are to be gleaned from the Jewish Samaritan relationship, viz:

1. There was socio-ethnic barrier and
2. There was religious barrier between them.

These form the background to the first part of dealing with the text.

The Place of women in Jesus’ Community: The Jewish understanding of the gender equality is spelt out mainly on the pages of the Old Testament scriptures. There are considerable writings on the subordinate role of women in the Old Testament. Some scholars like Clarence E. Macartney, Gail Ekanem, Shirley Lees and Mercy Amba Oduyoye among others have equally tried to paint a very good picture of the place of women in the Old Testament. Some have done this by picturing and portraying some heroic characters like Deborah, Esther, Ruth, and some other women as if these were the normative of the then society. These were exceptional cases and such were just a handful.

The creation account in Genesis 1:26-28 by the Priestly Source points out that, both the female and male gender were created in the image and likeness of God, received the breath of God which made them living beings, were given dominion over every aspect of creation and were blessed by God. Yahwist Source’s creation account in Genesis 2:18-25 tends to put a woman under man on a casual reading of the text and most of the other parts of the Old Testament tend to present a position of disparity between women and men, with the former being inferior to the later. In fact

the disparity between women and men could be seen in the common expression of men that, “it is a matter of thanksgiving not to be an unbeliever or barbarian, a slave, or a woman.”⁷

In religious matters, though women were part of the public attendees during the reading of the Torah and share in worship (Deuteronomy 31:12), they were not allowed to be priests or to take part in the feast of unleavened bread (Exodus 23:17). B. A. Robinson points out that after some Jews had returned from exile in Babylon and Second Temple was rebuilt in the 1st century B.C. (see 2 Chronicles 36:22):

One of the features was women’s court, which was considered as the least sacred area. Next was the court of the Israelites (reserved for males), then the court of the Priests, and finally the Temple itself. The courts were laid out in this order to separate the women as far as possible from the Temple.⁸

Socially, Robinson further postulates that, “women were restricted to roles of little or no authority, they could not testify in courts, appeared in public venues, were not allowed to talk to strangers and had to be doubly veiled when they left their homes.”⁹ Politically, “in the Old Testament the husband was certainly the patriarch and ba’al (lord or ruler) of his clan,”¹⁰ and the women were to remain in submission to their husbands as being lord over them.

Summarily, the Old Testament begins with a high perspective of woman being equal with man, but ends with woman being subordinate to man. Hence M. Beeching points out that, “as time went on there was a tendency, under rabbinical teaching to make the man more prominent and to assign to women an inferior role.”¹¹ This was a culture of gender inequality with women being the inferior gender.

Brief Exegesis of John 4:3-42: One of the most studied narratives of Jesus’ encounter with women in the Johannine Gospel is his encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well as recorded in John 4:3-42. Apart from the missionary perspective it has cast on the mission of Jesus in the light of the *missio dei*, it deals with the breaking of socio-ethnic, religious, gender and moral barriers. It is a major breaking of traditional boundaries, and it is only John who gives a record of this event.

The text begins with, “He [Jesus] left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria” (3-4). It is obvious that Jesus left Judea because of the threat to kill him before the actual ‘hour’ of his death, but the question is, must he go through Samaria? The text uses the

expression, “But he had (ἔδει from the word δέω) to go through Samaria” (v. 4). The word δέω used here has a sense of compulsion and necessity without an alternative. It means ‘being bound’ to do a thing. The question here is, if Jesus had to depart Judea back to Galilee, why was he ‘bound’ to pass through Samaria? Samuel M. Ngewa points out that:

A journey from Judea to Galilee could follow one of two routes. The first would pass through Samaria and would take about three days...the other way avoided Samaria altogether by crossing the Jordan to a point in Judean territory, going up the eastern side of the Jordan to bypass Samaria, and then crossing the Jordan again into Galilee, but it was preferred by many Jews because of their strict ideas about purity.¹²

Craig L. Blomberg on the other hand suggests “that Jesus would travel through Samaria to go from Judea to Galilee was natural”¹³, but from the standpoint of the use of the word, δέω and the differences between the Jews and the Samaritans, there may be more to the action of Jesus than just being natural. Rather than seeing it as a natural thing, Jo Ann Davidson’s position needs to be accepted that:

This introductory section provides the narrative with a decisive starting point. And the answer to why Jesus "must" travel by necessity through Samaria lies in the nature of his mission. Careful narrative analysis of the Fourth Gospel finds that Jesus uses the word ἔδει for his mission (3: 14; 9: 10,16; 16: 12,14; 29:9). Elsewhere throughout the Gospel, ἔδει is also used with the sense of divine necessity (e.g., 3:14,30; 9:4). By the time the complete narrative of John 4 is read, concluding with the unexpected harvest in Samaria, it is clear that the ἔδει at the outset does indeed refer to the divine will (4:34).¹⁴

In the discourse between Jesus and this unnamed woman of Samaria who came to draw water from Jacob’s well at noon, it needs to be noted that it was Jesus, a Jewish rabbi who initiated the discussion with a woman from an unfriendly race. Worthy of note is the fact that she came to the well at noon to fetch water. This was not normative. Fetching of water was always done either in the morning or evening when the sun is not hot. She may have come to fetch water at the noon because people were not around to mock her due to her social status as a divorcee or a serial polyandrous. She may have wanted to avoid the morning or evening crowd at the well. This may have been contingent on the fact that she may have been socially stereotyped and ‘ostracised’ by the community. By talking with her, Jesus broke the social stigma and stereotype wherewith this woman with questionable character in the community was plagued with.

Jesus initiating and discussing with a woman in a culture in which such an issue was not acceptable was a misnomer. The woman herself was shocked, hence her question, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (v. 9a); the commentary by John that follows the expression is vivid – “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” While it may be said that the astonishment of the woman was on racial level, that of the disciples was on gender level. John points out that “they were astonished that he was speaking with a woman” (v. 27). In respect to gender prejudice, the attitude of Jewish male as at that time are in the following citations of the rabbis – “one should not talk with a woman on the street, not even with his own wife, and certainly not with somebody else’s wife, because of the gossip of men and, it is forbidden to give a woman a greeting.”¹⁵ In this respect the disciples were shocked that Jesus conversed openly with a woman. Here, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza opines that “the evangelist emphasizes however, that the male disciples know better than to openly question and challenge Jesus’ egalitarian praxis.”¹⁶ Hence the expression, “but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?”¹⁷

The interaction between Jesus and this woman could be treated on historical/ethnic, religious/theological and evangelistic grounds. The woman in question seems not to be ignorant of both the ethnic, religious and political divide between the Jews and the Samaritans. This can be seen in her expression, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (v. 9a). She was well versed in the fact that, even though Samaria and the Jews of Jesus’ day had no separate political existence and were under one Roman procurator, they were defined by history and religion.

Religiously and theologically, the woman showed high level of intelligence. She, unlike some others who had encountered Jesus recognized him as a prophet and thus declared, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet” (v. 19). This was contingent on his telling her all that she ever did. In calling him a prophet (which to her meant someone who is able to read people’s secret), she not only admitted her guilt but was set for religious and theological discourse. Her question about the place of worship in v.20 brings to the fore her interest in religious matters and also brings to the fore the controversy between worshipping at Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem. Care must be taken to note that, another major rift between the Samaritans and the Jews was in religious matters. She understood the debate between the Jews and Samaritans over a place of worship. Craig S. Keener points out

that, Mount Gerizim, “the Samaritan holy site was equivalent to Judaism’s Jerusalem [and that the woman] uses the past tense of worship precisely because of her continuous consciousness of Jews’ and Samaritans’ racial separation.”¹⁸ Both the Jews and Samaritans ridiculed each other in respect of the others holy site, and the Jews even went further to “build many of their synagogues so that worshipers could face Jerusalem.”¹⁹

The discourse between this woman and Jesus cast more light not only on the subject of worship which has to be spiritual and not tied to any particular place of worship, but also on the person of God who is Spirit. It is good to note that one of the earliest teachings of Jesus Christ on the Holy Spirit and worship was during his interaction with a woman according to John as recorded in John 4:22-24. It means that Jesus considered the woman to be capable of understanding and disseminating this all-important theological concept, especially in the society where women were considered as those not capable of understanding theological issues.

The woman in question must have been theologically informed, after receiving the teaching on worship, she desired more and thus pressed on to know about the coming Messiah, who is called Christ and his mission of proclaiming “all things to us” (v. 25). Profoundly, in pressing to ask about the coming messiah, she used the word οἶδα instead of γινώσκω οἶδα is being able to recall from memory – “to remember, to recall, to recollect [example], λοιπὸν οὐκ οἶδα εἶ τινα ἄλλον ἐβαπτισα 1Cor 1:16.”²⁰ Vine, Merrill and White opine that, the verb under review is also said to be from the same root as εἶδω, meaning ‘to see’ which is a perfect tense whose meaning signify primarily:

‘To have seen or perceived’, ‘to know, to have knowledge of’, whether absolutely, as in divine knowledge, e. g., Matt 6:8,32; John 6:6,64; 8:14; 11:42; 13:11; 18:4; 2 Cor 11:31; 2 Peter 2:9; Rev 2:2,9,13,19; 3:1,8,15; or in the case of human ‘knowledge,’ to know from observation, e. g., 1 Thess 1:4,5; 2:1; 2 Thess 3:7.²¹

Γινώσκω on the other hand signifies “‘to be taken in knowledge, to come to know, recognize, understand,’ or ‘to understand completely,’ e. g., Mark 13:28, 29; John 13:12; 15:18; 21:17 [and] in its past tenses it frequently means ‘to know in the sense of realizing.’²²” It therefore connotes that οἶδα speaks more of what is known from past knowledge while γινώσκω is more from new information. γινώσκω frequently suggests beginning or progress in “knowledge,” while οἶδα suggests fullness of ‘knowledge,’ example, John 8:55, “you do not know ἐγνώκατε him,” that is

‘beginning to ‘know’ him, “but I know οἶδα him,” that is “ but I know him perfectly” The classical distinction between the two verbs is generally preserved in the New Testament, especially in the Johannine corpus where “οἶδα, is mostly used in contrast to γινώσκω, to designate an intuitive or certain knowledge.”²³ Οἶδα unlike γινώσκω speaks of knowing with deep sense of understanding, not a surface kind of knowledge, which therefore presents the woman as speaking from conviction of knowledge.

It is to this woman that Jesus made the first public disclosure of himself when he said, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (v. 26). Here, John records that the first ἐγώ εἰμι (I am) sayings of Jesus, is made to a woman. The expression is “used in the Septuagint (Ex. 3:14) in connection with God’s personal self-revelation”²⁴as YHWH to Moses in the Burning Bush. In the Johannine Gospel it is often used by Jesus in revealing himself to the world and to stress his identification with the Father. John’s light on this woman shows that just as she was knowledgeable in historical and racial matters, she was also knowledgeable in religious and theological issues.

In the evangelistic field, the woman having known who Jesus is, left her water pot and her main aim of leaving her house (which was drawing water), went into the city and shared the news with her people inviting them to meet the messiah (v. 28-29). Dorothy Lee-Pollard avers that:

Once she attains a sufficient understanding she runs to the villagers and shares with them her faith (vv 28-30). She leaves behind her water-jar because it is now irrelevant for her purpose; she now knows, at the deepest level, that Jesus's gift is a gift of the heart. In this action, she acknowledges both her thirst for life and her recognition of Jesus as the giver of living water.²⁵.

When the Samaritan villagers came to meet with the messiah, they believed because of the woman’s word (4:39. 42: διὰ τὸν λόγον [λαλιὰν] πιστεύειν). The significance of the expression διὰ τὸν λόγον πιστεύειν lies in the fact that it occurs again during Jesus’ priestly prayer for his disciples in Chapter 17:20 where Jesus prayed for those who will believe through the words of the disciples. It can rightly be said that John put this woman at par with the (presumably male) disciples who were at the Last Supper as bearing witness to Jesus through their words and bringing people to faith in Jesus based on their words. Though there may be objection that in Chapter 4, the Samaritans came to faith finally based on the direct words of Jesus and were not therefore

dependent on the woman's word as shown in v. 42, this was not based on the inferiority of the woman but may also be alluded to in Jesus' priestly intercession that those who believe in him through the words of the disciple may finally be with him and see his glory (17:24). In the real sense of missionary work, Raymond Brown points out that, "the Samaritan woman has a real missionary function."²⁶ This is affirmed by Rudolf Schnackenburg who says that, "St John's account is directly concerned not with the woman's moral conversion but rather with her faith and Jesus gladly allows this woman to help him to make the fields ripe for harvest in Samaria also (vv. 28 ff.)"²⁷

A cursory comparison of this woman with Nicodemus as presented by John in chapter three shows that, the woman of Samaria accepted Jesus' divine claim as the messiah in contrast to the learned male Pharisee, Nicodemus. Nicodemus disappeared from the scene quietly after discussing with Jesus but this woman "became Jesus' coworker (sic) by inviting the men and women of Samaria to find the gift of salvation. In contrast to Jesus' disciples, who went into the city only to buy bread, she hurried there to spread the news" (168). At the end of encounter with both parties, no testimony was given in respect of Nicodemus but was given in respect of the woman – "they said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior (sic) of the world'" (v. 42). They (Samaritans) invited Jesus (a Jew) to stay with them and He did for two days (v.40).

Jesus' Principles of Breaking Barriers:

Johannine presentation of this woman and her interaction with Jesus presents the breaking of socio-ethnic, religious, gender and moral barriers. The following principles can be gleaned from Jesus' interaction with the woman of Samaria:

1. Jesus taking the initiative in going through Samaria, discussing with the woman irrespective of her ethnic, gender and moral status speaks of the first principle in breaking barriers being one taking the first initiative irrespective of the existing barriers.
2. In breaking socio-ethnic barriers, it is always good to start from the lower level of the society instead of using the aristocrats as the entry point of discussion. Jesus started the interaction with a woman of low moral repute, through her, he gain access to the entire community.

3. In the bid to break barriers, none should be judged by outward appearance. The woman under review could naturally not be considered for some obvious reasons as the best person for Jesus to have interacted with. Consider the gender bias, moral bias and ethnic sentiment, religious bias, etc. but Jesus' interaction with her showed her a sound theologian and historian who seemed to have had more than a fair knowledge of divine plan which may even have eluded the male aristocrats of her time.
4. The last principle is avoidance of undue generalization. The hostility between Jews and Samaritans, if Jesus had generalized his experience in Luke 9:52-56 as the reference point, he could have generalized the idea that Samaritans will always be hostile to the Jews and so avoided going through Samaria, but he didn't. He avoided undue generalization.

Conclusion: From our text of reflection, we can deduce the following:

1. That by Jesus breaking the barrier and stereotype between the Jews and the Samaritans, Jesus destroyed the ethnic and religious barriers which could have hindered the two communities from mutually benefiting from each other and also being a blessing to the *oikumene*. The breaking of these stereotypes led to the Samaritans not only being recipients of the gospel but being instruments in the dissemination of the gospel. They became the platform wherewith the gospel was preached. Once stereotype in respect of ethnic group is broken, there will be a free flow of interaction between the once estranged ethnic groups. This will result in a symbiotic relationship. In Africa, if ethnic stereotype is broken, the estranged communities will become blessings to each other and by extension a blessing to other parts of Africa in particular and the world at large.
2. The breaking of the stereotype against women by Jesus, led to a woman being an instrument of blessing to the whole Samaritan community. Women can be drivers of economy and positive change which is one of the main drives of sustainable development.
3. The social stereotype broken by Jesus in respect of the woman with questionable life style brings to the fore that, everybody is useful and no one should be ostracised on account class or social status. The Samaritan woman irrespective of her social standing became a blessing to her community. In executing the agenda of sustainable development in Africa, those who belong to the low class have something positive to offer the entire community. There is need for them to be brought closer. Africa needs to listen to those who are declared as *osu* or other lower caste class, those stereotype with HIV/AIDS need to be listened to, etc.

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