

## ***The Globalization of Biblical Interpretation: A Test Case John 3-4***

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*The globalization of hermeneutics has generated recent, intense debate. One useful definition views it as the process of asking new questions of the text, particularly in light of the experiences of marginalization of a large percentage of the world's population. John 3-4 and its dialogues between Jesus and the contrasting characters of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman offer a fruitful test case of this process. Striking inversions of contemporary expectations about their roles result. Interesting answers emerge from raising questions of liberation theology, feminism, politics and religious pluralism. Metacriticism, however, must move us beyond these more parochial, though often overlooked, concerns. Ultimately John subordinates both characters to his focus on the significance of Jesus.*

*Key Words: globalization, hermeneutics, John, Nicodemus, Samaritans*

Particularly since Don Browning's pioneering work in 1986, "globalization" has become a prominent term in biblical hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup> Students of scripture for a slightly longer time, of course, have realized that traditional historical-critical interpretation has been disproportionately Eurocentric and androcentric, and various new methodologies have been developed to try to correct this imbalance. Now, however, we are seeing a spate of studies explicitly in the name of globalization: the initial issue of a new international journal on hermeneutics,<sup>2</sup> two entire fascicles of the journal of the Association of Theological Schools,<sup>3</sup> and perhaps most importantly, a major

1. Don S. Browning, "Globalization and the Task of Theological Education in North America," *Theological Education* 23 (Autumn 1986) 43-59.

2. *Biblical Interpretation* 1.1 (1993).

3. *Theological Education* 29 (Spring 1993); 29, Supplement 1 (Fall 1993).

monograph on the globalization of theological education, complete with theological essays, case studies, and interpretive commentaries, edited by staff members of the Hartford-based Plowshares International organization.<sup>4</sup> That organization itself has worked within the rubrics of the ATS and the SBL not only to internationalize biblical and theological scholarship through the contributions of underrepresented constituencies but also to take theological educators on intensive Third World immersions to meet with religious, political and business leaders as well as members of grass-roots, impoverished communities. In so doing North Americans experience firsthand the issues of globalization which face a majority of the world daily but which are often marginalized in the North American scholarly guilds.<sup>5</sup>

Given the diverse groups of scholars and educators participating in globalization programs, it is not surprising that there are no uniformly accepted definitions of the process. But increasingly, five areas of inquiry keep on coming to the fore—issues of liberation theology, feminism, religious pluralism, the disparity between the world's rich and poor, and contextualization of biblical material.<sup>6</sup> A definition adopted by a prominent American evangelical seminary which has given the globalization agenda a more central place in its curriculum begins by focusing on historic Christianity's mandate to worldwide mission but goes on to elaborate "an empathetic understanding of different genders, races, cultures, and religions to be able to contextualize the gospel more effectively," "increased application and promotion of biblical principles to such global issues as economic development, social justice, political systems, human rights, and international conflict," and related concerns.<sup>7</sup> To avoid lapsing into the relativizing and self-defeating methodologies of postmodernism, which leave the locus of meaning in the understanding of a text primarily or exclusively in the lap of the reader, it is perhaps best to think of the globalization of biblical interpretation as the processes either of asking questions of a biblical passage which are not traditionally

4. Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A. Evans, David A. Roozen, eds., *The Globalization of Theological Education* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

5. The major recent programs developed include "The Bible in Asia, Africa, and Latin America" study groups and plenary sessions at annual SBL meetings (with featured speakers such as Itumeleng Mosala, Elsa Tamez and John Pobee) and a five-year travel program involving teams of representatives of twelve American seminaries visiting India, Sri Lanka, Peru, Cuba, Brazil, the Philippines, China, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and various Eastern European countries.

6. Cf. further Craig L. Blomberg, "The Implications of Globalization for Biblical Understanding," in *Globalization*, eds. Evans, Evans, and Roozen, 213-28, 241-45.

7. "Final Report on the Globalization Project at Denver Seminary" (Denver: Denver Seminary, 1993) 2.

asked within a particular interpretive community or of allowing new answers, more supportive of the world's oppressed, to emerge from old questions out of a more careful exegesis of the text itself.<sup>8</sup> And these new questions and answers are often suggested as we read the Bible through the eyes of individuals quite different from ourselves.

As a sample of the fruit that such an "evangelical globalization" of biblical interpretation might bear, we consider the two dialogues of Jesus, with Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman, in John 3-4. This study will bracket questions of tradition-history, focusing exclusively on the final form of the text. It will assume, as recent scholarship has adequately demonstrated, that the canonical form of John is replete with thematic unity, literary artistry and intentional characterization.<sup>9</sup> And it will reflect a theological tradition that believes that the messages of the text, however they emerge, are not merely objects of study for historians of ancient religions but authoritative, when appropriately contextualized, for persons of all cultures today.<sup>10</sup>

John 2–4 forms a literary unit within the Fourth Gospel, with 3:1-15 and 4:4-42 as the central dialogues of this section.<sup>11</sup> Following John's prologue (1:1-18) and introduction to the Baptist, Jesus, and their first disciples (1:19-51), Jesus performs the first of his signs, which, along with his discourses, will dominate the first major segment of his gospel (chaps. 2-11). Chaps. 5-11, however, focus primarily on Jesus' ministry by sign and discourse at the various festivals in Jerusalem. Chaps. 2–4 are thus set apart not merely by these geographical and conceptual disjunctions but also by the inclusion of the two miracles at Cana (2:1-11 and 4:43-54), the only two signs in John's Gospel explicitly enumerated (2:11, 4:54).<sup>12</sup> What is more, each

8. The best solution to the vexed question of the locus of meaning is to acknowledge elements which author, text and reader all contribute to the interpretive process, but to leave meaning as fundamentally inscribed in a text. See Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990) 156-59, and the literature there cited.

9. See esp. E. Ruckstuhl, *Die literarische Einheit des Johannesevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and several of the contributions to *Perspectives on John: Method and Interpretation in the Fourth Gospel*, eds. Robert B. Sloan and Mikeal C. Parsons (Lewiston: Mellen, 1993).

10. See William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 81-116, for more discussion.

11. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 166-240. Mary M. Pazdan, "Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman: Contrasting Models of Discipleship," *BTB* 17 (1987) 145-48, finds 3:1-21 and 4:1-42 as a diptych within the middle of three panels: 1:19-2:25, 3:1-4:42, and 4:43-6:69.

12. Cf. Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 187, who speaks of the "Cana to Cana" literary development in John 2-4.

of the pericopes in these three chapters contributes to introducing the radical newness of Jesus' person and work *vis-à-vis* much contemporary Jewish practice and belief: water into wine (2:1-11) parabolically symbolizing the new joy of the kingdom,<sup>13</sup> the cleansing of the temple (2:12-25) focusing on the new worship centered in the resurrected Jesus (as against the limitations of temple or certain holy places—cf. further 4:20-24),<sup>14</sup> the conversation with Nicodemus (3:1-15) calling attention to the new birth which he needs to experience, with the appended commentary (3:16-21)<sup>15</sup> and material on Jesus and the Baptist (3:22-36) elaborating the themes introduced in this dialogue.<sup>16</sup> Chap. 4, finally, combines the lengthy episode of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (vv. 1-42) with the healing of a presumably Gentile official's son (vv. 43-54) so as to stress a new, universal scope to Jesus' mission.<sup>17</sup>

Until quite recently, the Fourth Gospel has not figured significantly in liberationist studies, only slightly more so in feminist scholarship, and virtually never in advocacies for religious pluralism.<sup>18</sup> Clearly other parts of scripture lend themselves more obviously to such concerns. But at least in these two chapters, there is more material for these discussions than first may meet the eye. The central dialogues between Jesus and Nicodemus on the one hand and the Samaritan woman on the other could scarcely present a more striking set of contrasts. The two characters are mirror opposites of each other: Nicodemus, a man, powerful, probably well-to-do, Jewish, a religious leader, a model of piety and wisdom, and given a name; the Samaritan, a woman, powerless, probably poor, non-Jewish, one with whom there would have been no expectation of special religious insight or practice, a paradigm of the outcast and ritually unclean (in Jewish eyes) because of her marital experience, and not given a name.<sup>19</sup> Of many theological and literary themes in John 3–4 worthy of attention, it is this contrast on which we want to focus more atten-

13. Craig L. Blomberg, "The Miracles as Parables," *Gospel Perspectives* (ed. David Wenham and Craig Blomberg; Sheffield: JSOT, 1986) 6.333-37.

14. C. H. Talbert, *Reading John* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 64, stresses the theme of "warrants for a different kind of worship" as pervading all of 2:12-12:50.

15. On the unity of 3:1-21, centering on the interpretation of baptism as a rebirth enabling one to see the revelation of God, see William C. Grese, "'Unless One Is Born Again': The Use of a Heavenly Journey in John 3," *JBL* 107 (1988) 677-93.

16. On the themes of vv. 22-36 and their connections with vv. 1-21, see esp. Walter Klaiber, "Der irdische and der himmlische Zeuge," *NTS* 36 (1990) 205-33.

17. On the identification of this man as a Gentile, and possibly even a Roman, see A. H. Mead, "The Βασιλικός in John 4:46-53," *JSNT* 23 (1985) 69-72.

18. An important exception is R. J. Karris, *Jesus and the Marginalized in John's Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1990). See also the literature cited in nn. 51-52 and 55-58 below.

19. Cf. further Pazdan, "Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman," 146–48; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 134-37.

tion. And the questions which we want to raise, which are not always raised, and to which we want to suggest answers somewhat different from the standard ones which have been suggested when these questions are raised, deal with the characterization of precisely these two individuals. Is either intended to be portrayed primarily as a positive model of discipleship? Is either intended to be seen in primarily a negative light? Or is there an inherent ambivalence in one or both characters? And what is the significance of these characterizations for the messages John wishes to convey?

### THE CHARACTERIZATION OF NICODEMUS

A long history of Christian interpretation of Nicodemus assumes that he eventually became a full-fledged disciple. Already in the first centuries of the common era, legends developed about the additional exploits of Nicodemus the Christian.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, it is important to recall that he appears in the Fourth Gospel not only in chap. 3 but again in 7:45-52, arguing for due process of law to be applied to Jesus, and in 19:38-42 as an aide to Joseph of Arimathea (the latter explicitly called a secret disciple) in the burial of Christ. In 3:1-15, it is pointed out that he demonstrates an unusual openness to Jesus for a Pharisee. Contemporary redaction criticism consistently characterizes Nicodemus as symbolizing the crypto-Christians of the Johannine community and/or official Judaism (or Jewish-Christianity) in "a situation of openness before the claims of Christ."<sup>21</sup>

Contrary to these dominant perspectives, there are good reasons for seeing John's portrait of Nicodemus as substantially more negative, esp. in 3:1-15.<sup>22</sup>

(1) 2:23-25 should be seen not merely as the conclusion to the temple cleansing episode but as a transition and introduction to the Nicodemus narrative.<sup>23</sup> John has just described that many in Jerusalem believed in Jesus because of his signs but that Jesus did not "believe in" them (the identical verb πιστεύω) because "he knew what was in a

20. The most famous of which are recorded in the so-called Gospel of Nicodemus; for texts and discussion, see Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: Westminster; Cambridge: J. Clarke, 1991) 1.501-36.

21. On "crypto-Christians," see M. de Jonge, "Nicodemus and Jesus: Some Observations on Misunderstanding and Understanding in the Fourth Gospel," *BJRL* 53 (1970-71) 337-59. The quotation comes from Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972) 149. Cf. also Kenneth Grayston, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 34-35, for this latter perspective.

22. For a portrait of Nicodemus as unrelentingly negative, see Michael Goulder, "Nicodemus," *SJT* 44 (1991) 153-68.

23. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word, 1987) 47. Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Lecture de l'évangile selon Jean* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1988) 1.284, goes so far as to take 2:23-3:2a as the initial episode of the Nicodemus narrative.

man [person]" (ἦν ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ). Immediately he continues, "Now there was a man" (ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος-3:1), suggesting that Nicodemus will illustrate the generalization of 2:25.<sup>24</sup> Nothing in the verses to come threatens this presumption, and Nicodemus' relatively positive estimation of Jesus *based on his signs* (3:2) actually confirms it.

(2) Nicodemus is called a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. The rather unrelentingly negative portrait of Jewish leaders in John is well known.<sup>25</sup> Pharisees from Jerusalem have appeared already in 1:19-25 as skeptics of the Baptist's ministry and the more immediate episode of the temple cleansing (2:12-25) has reinforced their incredulity.

(3) Nicodemus comes by night. Whatever possible historical reasons—fear, secrecy, convenience—which may have prompted this timing, John surely sees it as symbolic of Nicodemus' spiritual darkness. The links between vv. 2 and 19-21 have often been pointed out. V. 21 leaves open the possibility that Nicodemus might yet come to the light, but the more dominant theme in vv. 19-21 is the lament over those who remain in darkness. That Nicodemus progressively recedes from view throughout 3:1-15 and that John gives no indication of any positive response on his part to Jesus' call for a new birth make it unlikely that John sees Nicodemus as a pilgrim from darkness into light.<sup>26</sup>

(4) Nicodemus cannot bring himself to address Jesus as anything more than a ῥαββί. To be sure, this has struck many as a generous overture in itself, inasmuch as Jesus had received no formal rabbinic training. But elsewhere in John, this title appears as little more than a polite form of address to one who is respected as a teacher (cf. 1:38, 1:49, 3:26, 4:31, 6:25). In the other Gospels, "teacher" is often noticeably deficient as a way of addressing Jesus.<sup>27</sup> And even in John 3, it sounds rather mild after the prologue and the collection of titles ascribed to Christ in 1:41-49.

(5) Nicodemus' dependence on signs ties in not only with 2:23-25 but with John's more pervasive theme of belief based on signs as a less than adequate foundation for faith (cf. esp. 4:48 and 20:29).<sup>28</sup>

24. The δέ could theoretically be adversative, but in context the continuative fits better. See J. Ramsey Michaels, *John* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983) 42.

25. As representative studies, cf. Urban C. von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews': A Critical Survey," *NTS* 28 (1982) 33-60; A. S. Geyser, "Israel in the Fourth Gospel," *Neot* 20 (1986) 13-20; and M. J. Cook, "The Gospel of John and the Jews," *RevExp* 84 (1987) 259-71.

26. *Contra* Jean-Marie Auwers, "La nuit de Nicodeme (*Jean* 3,2; 19,39) ou l'ombre du langage," *RB* 97 (1990) 481-523.

27. Particularly in Matthew, on which see Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 28.

28. Robert Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 65-83. For a somewhat more positive assessment of the ambivalent data in the Fourth Gospel on

(6) For someone described as *the* teacher of Israel (ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραήλ-3:10), Nicodemus' ignorance seems astonishing. He seems fundamentally unable to grasp even basic spiritual truths founded on the scripture he knew and taught so thoroughly. Despite a variety of alternate suggestions, the best explanation of the background of "born of water and spirit" (3:5) still seems to be the combination of these terms in the spiritual cleansing of Israel predicted in Ezek 36:25-27.<sup>29</sup> And these are merely earthly things of which Jesus has spoken, in contrast with "the heavenly things" (v. 12) which Nicodemus would be even more unprepared to receive.<sup>30</sup>

(7) Peter Cotterell's discourse analysis of John 3:1-15 proves particularly illuminating. Cotterell calls attention to the progressively shorter contributions of Nicodemus to the dialogue and to Jesus' refusal to continue the conversation at each stage on the terms Nicodemus desires.<sup>31</sup> Both of these factors suggest that Nicodemus is meant to be an *increasingly* negative model as the story unfolds, and that Jesus demonstrates his superiority (according to social convention) by guiding the discussion in the directions he chooses. It is also worth noting his increasingly pointed rebukes (vv. 3, 5, 10).

Notwithstanding all seven of these points, the fact that Nicodemus reappears in a potentially more positive light two times later in the Fourth Gospel must be taken into account. Jouette Bassler, therefore, seems to be correct in speaking of neither a primarily positive nor unrelentingly negative portrait of Nicodemus either in John 3 by itself or in the Gospel as a whole. Rather, he remains an ambivalent character. But what is important for our study is the significance of this ambivalence: a person with one foot in the world of belief and one in the world of disbelief remains, for the fourth evangelist, outside the kingdom. In other words, without demonstrating clear loyalty to Jesus, Nicodemus is marginalized.<sup>32</sup> This is a striking label for a character who was everything but marginalized by the standards of his society, in a passage which almost immediately precedes a story about a character who most likely would have been marginalized by most in her world.

the topic, see Marianne Meye Thompson, "Signs and Faith in the Fourth Gospel," *BBR* 1 (1991) 89-108.

29. See esp. Linda Belleville, "'Born of Water and Spirit': John 3:5," *TrinJ* n.s. 2 (1981) 125-41. The parallelism between "born again" and "born of water and spirit" renders less likely the interpretation of water as physical birth; *contra*, e.g., Ben Witherington III, "The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6-8," *NTS* 35 (1989) 155-60.

30. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Basingstoke: Pickering & Inglis, 1983) 87.

31. Peter Cotterell, "The Nicodemus Conversation: A Fresh Appraisal," *ExpT* 96 (1985) 237-42.

32. Jouette M. Bassler, "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 108 (1989) 646.

## THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

There is less disagreement about the characterization of the woman of John 4:4-42 than about the portrait of Nicodemus. It is fairly self-evident that Jesus makes unusual overtures to a person with whom even his followers were surprised to find him talking (4:27). But there is greater disagreement on the point of the story overall. A history of the interpretation of this passage demonstrates that many have not felt the full force of Jesus' encounter with this woman who epitomizes the ostracized of her society. Five main approaches have characterized a reading of this narrative prior to quite recent scholarship.<sup>33</sup> These include: (1) the allegorical reading, particularly with the five husbands as the five false gods of the Samaritans (2 Kgs 17:30-31), even though in reality that text lists seven gods (of five nations);<sup>34</sup> (2) the existential interpretation, known best from the work of Bultmann, which focuses on Jesus' disclosure of the nature of authentic human existence;<sup>35</sup> (3) the pastoral model, popular particularly in conservative circles, in which the text becomes a manual of techniques for evangelism;<sup>36</sup> (4) the salvation-historical approach, which focuses on vv. 21-24, and the shift in the ages which does away with the need for "holy space";<sup>37</sup> and (5) the intertextual analysis, which focuses on parallels with Old Testament scenes in which men find their wives when they go to drink water from a well (Gen 24:10-61, 29:1-20; Exod 2:15b-21).<sup>38</sup> Now doubtless (2) through (5) all capture a genuine dimension of the text, and we will argue below that a different allegorical reading might rehabilitate even approach (1), but it is questionable whether any of these reflects the central impact which this story would have made on a Jewish or Christian audience, given the nature of Jesus' dialogue partner.

33. Cf. David S. Dockery, "Reading John 4:1-45: Some Diverse Hermeneutical Perspectives," *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (1988) 127-40.

34. Cf. further Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 188-91. For a quite different allegorical approach, linking this narrative with the sixth day of creation, see Calum M. Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman," *NTS* 26 (1980) 332-46.

35. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 175-202.

36. E.g., David C. Watson, *I Believe in Evangelism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976) 98-113. Cf. recently Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here is Your King* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 85-86, despite his disclaimer that the story "sounds deeper notes" as well.

37. This is a major theme of many sections of W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974); and, more recently, of *Worship: Adoration and Action*, ed. D. A. Carson (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

38. See esp. Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 101. Cf. Jeffrey L. Staley, *The Print's First Kiss* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 98-103; and Jerome H. Neyrey, "Jacob Traditions and the Interpretation of John 4:10-26," *CBQ* 41 (1979) 419-37.

In other words, missing from all five of these approaches is the cumulative effect of the extraordinarily positive portrait of this unnamed Samaritan woman. Again seven dimensions of this portrait may be sketched.

(1) She was a woman, a Samaritan, and at least *suspect* of gross sexual immorality. This much has been regularly observed,<sup>39</sup> so at the very least we need to recognize in this dialogue a focus not nearly so much on the *how* of evangelism but on the *who*.

(2) Applying Cotterell's discourse analysis to vv. 7-26 discloses quite the opposite state of affairs as in 3:1-15.<sup>40</sup> The woman and Jesus remain equal dialogue partners throughout the story. Understandably, Jesus has to initiate the conversation this time (v. 7) and then shifts from talking about literal water to spiritual drink (v. 10). But in each case the woman's reply is more lengthy than Jesus' own words. After the relatively evenly balanced repartee of vv. 13-15, Jesus seemingly shifts the topic to that of the woman's husband (v. 16). A brief reply elicits Jesus' revelation of his knowledge of her prior marital life (vv. 17-18), but this time the woman changes the direction of the conversation to the differences between Jews and Samaritans (vv. 19-20).<sup>41</sup> In light of Jesus' unwillingness to countenance any such changes in the conversation with Nicodemus, we are startled to read that he accepts her "gambit" (vv. 21-24). The woman shifts again to the question of the Messiah (v. 25), to which Jesus also surprisingly responds.

(3) Closely tied to this last observation is Jesus' remarkably plain self-revelation. Even for John's Gospel, this is the most direct assertion by Jesus of his own identity outside of 8:58.<sup>42</sup> And despite the reticence of many commentators to accept it, the ἐγώ εἰμι of 4:26 should probably be given its full force here. Jesus is not merely claiming to be the Messiah but to be the divine "I am" of Exodus 3:14, and this to a Samaritan!<sup>43</sup> Yet when the Jews ask him to declare himself plainly, he continues to evade their questions (8:25, 10:25).

39. E.g., Michaels, *John*, 54: "The woman serves to represent three 'oppressed groups' in which Jesus, according to the synoptic Gospels, showed a marked interest."

40. See above, n. 31.

41. This should probably not be seen, with Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 254, as one of her persistent "attempts to avoid the issues that Jesus raises," but it certainly does mark a shift in the progress of the conversation.

42. The "I am" sayings are more metaphorical than are often recognized. So, too, there are inherent ambiguities in John 10:30, notwithstanding the response of the Jews. See further Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1987) 164-66.

43. See esp. Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 72: "The association of these two verses leaves little doubt that this is an absolute *ego eimi*, that is, an *ego eimi* saying that is an unqualified revelation of Jesus' identity. Jesus does not intend for us to supply the predicate from the woman's statement in v. 25.

(4) Laurence Cantwell overinterprets only slightly in his exposition of the woman's "immortal longings" in this conversation. Over and over again, he highlights the unique dignity and delicacy with which Jesus treats the woman, particularly surprising after his pointed rebukes of Nicodemus, who should have understood the truth. For Cantwell, "the large lesson that is taught by this touching conversation is that God can find a deep and desperate thirst for him where men would see only superficiality and failure."<sup>44</sup>

(5) Jesus' gentleness should govern our understanding of vv. 17-18 as well. One easily reads in a rebuke here where none may have been intended. Jesus declares his knowledge of the woman's past and present marital status very matter-of-factly and arguably with some sympathy. Calling her husband is simply the first stage in her role as witness; soon she will call all her townfolk to Jesus.<sup>45</sup> Implications of profligacy have to be read into the text, and (as we shall see below) there may be good reasons for viewing her more as a victim than as a whore!

(6) On her own, the woman manages to call Jesus a "prophet" (v. 19), which is at least one notch better than Nicodemus' "rabbi/teacher." Given the overlap in Samaritan theology between the prophet of Deut 18:18 and the Messiah, she may have begun to suspect something even more exalted about Jesus.<sup>46</sup> This would certainly explain the transition to her next topic of interest in v. 25, which explicitly deals with the role of the coming Messiah.

(7) Finally, and perhaps most notably, the woman herself becomes an "apostle." The close parallels between her role in testifying about Jesus to the Samaritans and the actions of John the Baptist, Andrew, and Philip in John 1 in pointing people to Christ demonstrate a functional equivalence between these male and female witnesses.<sup>47</sup> Feminists from Schussler Fiorenza onwards have rightly stressed the role of the Samaritan woman as a missionary to her own people.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, just as certain potentially positive features ultimately rendered Nicodemus' characterization more ambivalent

Jesus is *not* confirming that he is the Messiah expected by the Samaritan woman but is using the *ego eimi* in its fullest sense to identify himself as God's revealer, the sent one of God."

44. Laurence Cantwell, "Immortal Longings in Sermone Humili: A Study of John 4.5-26," *SJT* 36 (1983) 85.

45. For both of these points, cf. S. J. Nortjé, "The Role of Women in the Fourth Gospel," *Neot* 20 (1986) 25.

46. On Samaritan messianic expectations, see esp. John Macdonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 362-71. Still useful, too, is Moses Gaster, *The Samaritans* (London: Oxford, 1925) 90-93.

47. Cf. Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 194-95.

48. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 327-28.

than totally negative, certain potentially negative features dull the splendor of this woman's model just enough to create a certain ambivalence here, too. The nature of her witness is curious. Whereas John the Baptist calls Jesus "the Lamb of God" (1:29), Andrew hails him "the Messiah" (1:41), and Philip proclaims him as "the one Moses wrote about in the Law" (1:45), all this woman ever says is "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did" (4:29, 39). It is true she adds in v. 29, "Could this be the Christ?" but the Greek introduces the question with the particle μήτι. This adverb need not imply a negative answer; it can even suggest a cautious affirmative (7:25-26). But John could easily have chosen to use οὐ if he had wanted to avoid any sense of hesitancy.<sup>49</sup> V. 42 also has a built-in ambiguity; it could reflect a qualified endorsement of the woman's ministry. But in light of 2:23-3:2, with which this verse forms an inclusio, it seems more likely to represent the inadequacy of a faith which is built on anything less than full-fledged personal appropriation of belief in Jesus. In this respect, the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus have at least one thing in common: neither yet fully fathoms the identity of this unusual man from Nazareth. Or, as Raymond Brown puts it, "the dialogue is meant to challenge the Johannine reader to understand more than Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman does." Again, "Jesus is from God and therefore he remains above everyone's grasp."<sup>50</sup> Still, it remains reasonable to infer that John sees the Samaritan woman as inside the kingdom, despite some ambivalence concerning her faith, whereas Nicodemus remains outside, however close to the truth he may have come.

#### ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS FROM GLOBALIZATION

Identifying with marginalized persons in our contemporary world and reading John 3-4 through their eyes raise additional questions for the text and suggest further applications of it. How might one from an underprivileged race or ethnic group hear Jesus' call to Nicodemus to be born again? Clearly, Christ's point is that neither privilege, nor power, nor nationality guarantees eternal life, only a right relationship with him. One can certainly appreciate Frederick Herzog's provocative paraphrase and application of 3:3 for American society: "No man can see the kingdom of God unless he becomes black," by which he means "identification with the wretched of the

49. Of a variety of attempts to capture the significance of the lifin here, perhaps the most balanced is that of Morris, *John*, 275, n. 29: "It is as though a negative answer might be expected, but a positive one is hoped for."

50. Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 62.

earth via rebirth through the Spirit."<sup>51</sup> When chaps. 3 and 4 are juxtaposed, David Rensburger's contemporization becomes apposite:

Nicodemus is to be found . . . where Christians in power relate to powerless Christians. . . . Certainly it applies to any Christian who has not let this identity be known in a place where real danger might result. This includes those who are reluctant to become known as activists in struggles for justice and peace.<sup>52</sup>

Such struggles need not entail full-fledged pacifism but they surely should embrace the search for alternatives to just war.<sup>53</sup> Nor need they be bound by stereotypically left-wing political agendas, but they should at the very least be "completely pro-life."<sup>54</sup>

What further insights could emerge from reading the story of the Samaritan woman through a marginalized woman's eyes? Perhaps the most striking gap in standard scholarship appears in the almost universal but unfounded assumption that this woman was sexually immoral. How did she come to have five husbands in a society in which women had very little ability to obtain a divorce, if not because at least four of them had themselves initiated those legal proceedings? The faulty could well have resided more with the men than with the woman; we simply have no way of knowing. That she was currently living with a man to whom she was not legally married might just as easily have stemmed from her fifth husband having abandoned her without a legal divorce and from her need to be joined with a man for legal and social protection.<sup>55</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian swings the pendulum too far in the opposite direction of what we can know when he confidently asserts,

Amazingly, this woman whom Jesus treated with extreme deference was a pathetic creature who had been abused by men and treated as a harlot

51. Frederick Herzog, *Liberation Theology: Liberation in the Light of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Seabury, 1972) 62, 65.

52. David Rensburger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 115. On the other hand, Jose Miranda, *Being and the Messiah* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) 164-65, overstates the case when he links Nicodemus with the antichrists of 1 John 2 who confess Jesus "at the highest level of faith" but are totally rejected by him.

53. Cf. the movement among contemporary Christian ethicists to define criteria for a "just peace"—see esp. Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1992).

54. Cf. Ronald J. Sider, who opposes abortion and promotes family values but also fights against poverty and the proliferation of nuclear weapons (*Completely Pro-Life* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1987]).

55. Alice Mathews, *A Woman Jesus Can Teach* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1991) 24-26. Cf. Grayston, *John*, 42: "This is a case of a woman's socio-sexual dependence on the manipulation of men."

She had been married five times and dismissed in divorce five times. The last fellow who had picked her up did not even bother marrying her.<sup>56</sup>

But Bilezikian's reconstruction may remain closer to the truth than standard assumptions. At any rate, Denise Lardner Carmody captures the appropriate balance when she speaks of Jesus paying little heed to the woman's past, with its five marriages, "whether because of forces beyond her control or because of her own inclinations," but rather helping her realize that "she need not think of herself as a being condemned to haul water and pleasure men." Rather, "she could be a witness to salvation, a sharer and proclaimer of great good news."<sup>57</sup>

A third recurring theme of globalization, as we have seen, is liberation in the political arena. Just recently several studies have supplemented the standard reconstructions of Jewish and Greek backgrounds to the Fourth Gospel with an insistence that we read John's work against a backdrop of Roman imperialism as well.<sup>58</sup> "Savior of the world" as a title for Jesus in 4:42 stands in striking contrast to the emperors' arrogation of that title to themselves. Sychar (4:5) was near Sebaste; the Roman presence there was well known. And what if the number of husbands the woman has had is symbolic—not of false gods but of the five nations of 2 Kgs 17:29-31 which originally combined to form the Samaritan people? Craig Koester has recently argued along these lines and suggested that the sixth man who is no husband could stand for idolatrous Rome. Hence Jesus could be calling the woman, like the other Samaritans she represents, to reject colonial attachments for true spiritual leadership.<sup>59</sup> This proposal is clearly more speculative than most of the rest in this study, but it does account for an unusual detail—five marriages in a society which frowned seriously on more than two or three—a detail which continues to drive even certain recent interpreters back to a quest for some allegorical significance.<sup>60</sup>

Are there insights which might emerge from John 3-4 that address debates concerning religious pluralism? Certainly it is striking that the Samaritan woman comes to whatever faltering faith she has far more readily than Nicodemus, the exalted Jewish teacher. Might Jesus' more plain self-revelation to Samaritans tie in with their slightly less politicized understandings of the Messiah—the *Taheb*--

56. Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 99.

57. Denise Lardner Carmody, *Biblical Woman: Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 105.

58. See esp. Richard J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992). Cf. Craig R. Koester, "'The Savior of the World' (John 4:42)" *JBL* 109 (1990) 665-80; Talbert, *John*, 118.

59. Koester, "Savior," 668-74.

60. See above, n. 34.

a "restorer" or "converter"?<sup>61</sup> We must not overlay the distinctions between Samaritan and Jewish expectations. Certainly both wanted freedom from Rome to be able to live in their land in peace and prosperity. But there are hints in the imagery of water at a well and of a revealer of truth that Jesus is presenting himself precisely in ways designed to draw the connection for a Samaritan between himself and the *Taheb*.<sup>62</sup>

### THE PRACTICE OF METACRITICISM

It would be tempting, in light of the modern *Weltgeist*, to stop at this juncture and declare no single reading of these two dialogues as normative or, worse still, to engage in some kind of creative but unhelpful deconstruction of the texts.<sup>63</sup> More cautious but still unsatisfactory would be the pronouncement of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman as yet one more example of the theme of "the great reversal," so well known especially from the pages of Luke's Gospel.<sup>64</sup> But, as we have already noted, there is an inherent ambivalence in both characters even if one seems to be presented as outside and the other inside the kingdom. Part of the reason for this is that neither character is the *main* character in the passages in which they appear. The texts remain fundamentally christocentric: Jesus is the principal personage in both passages. In our eagerness for globalized readings and new insights it is easy to lose sight of this simple fact. There is a message relating to the person and work of Jesus which subordinates all liberationist, feminist, and postmodernist readings, important as each may be, to the overarching theme of these chapters and of the Fourth Gospel more generally: the presentation of the words and works of Jesus so as to engender belief in him (20:31). Biblical scholarship which does not yet acknowledge such "metacriticism" lags behind the social sciences in this respect.<sup>65</sup> While most traditional interpreters are not yet adequately globalized, some more *avant-garde* critics need globalization of a quite different sort—thoughtful reflection on dominant readings of texts down through church history, which these critics

61. Scott, *Sophia*, 191. Cf. Rudolf Schackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968) 1.441.

62. Bruce, *John*, 105; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 63-65.

63. As, e.g., in Stephen D. Moore, "Are There Impurities in the Living Water that the Johannine Jesus Dispenses? Deconstruction, Feminism, and the Samaritan Woman," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993) 207-27.

64. The title of an important study of New Testament ethics by Allan Verhey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); and a label repeatedly used for Lucan emphases throughout Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992).

65. See esp. Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missiological Research* 11 (1987) 104-12.

have rejected, with the view to the possibility that they might contain elements of genuine truth which lay existential claims on their lives.<sup>66</sup>

There is clear evidence that John 3-4 make such claims. 2:23-25 and 4:39-42 form an *inclusio* around these dialogues, describing the need for belief in Jesus based on more than merely secondhand evidence—signs or others' testimony. The theological heart of 3:1-15 has almost universally been recognized to lie with Jesus' threefold claim upon Nicodemus' ultimate commitments: he must be "born again" (or, "from above")—3:3, 7, i.e., "born of water and the spirit" (v. 5). In the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, the ideological core of the conversation comes in vv. 21-26, as Jesus relativizes both Jewish and Samaritan truth-claims with his messianic and even divine self-revelation. To the extent that contemporary Christianity begins to resemble Nicodemus' dependence on status and tradition or the narrow nationalisms reflected in these latter verses, correctives may have to come from surprising sources, even outside professing Christianity. But all must be measured by the criterion of the canonical Jesus.

Even as pluralistic a critic as David Jobling recognizes limits on the interpretive process. Toward the end of his article on globalization in biblical studies, he concludes,

Major parts of the Bible certainly project a divine "preferential option for the poor," but they do so—within the dominant monotheistic globalizing discourse—with the implication that the poor must place their hope in the one universal God, that their particular projects need grounding in the universal.<sup>67</sup>

This is certainly true of John 3-4. D. A. Carson makes the point less circuitously and closely approximates the balanced interpretation for which this article has been striving:

John may intend a contrast between the woman of this narrative and Nicodemus of ch. 3. He was learned, powerful, respected, orthodox, theologically trained; she was unschooled, without influence, despised, capable only of folk religion. He was a man, a Jew, a ruler; she was a woman, a Samaritan, a moral outcast. *And both needed Jesus.*<sup>68</sup>

66. For elaboration see Blomberg, "Globalization."

67. David Jobling, "Globalization in Biblical Studies/Biblical Studies in Globalization," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993) 101.

68. Carson, *John*, 216, italics mine.