Jesus the Bridegroom and the Woman at the Well¹

A ‘Personal Relationship’ with Jesus the Bridegroom

The unity of Christ and the Church... also implies the distinction of the two within a personal relationship. This aspect is often expressed by the image of bridegroom and bride. (Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 796)

John the Baptist and the Bridegroom Messiah

John answered: “… You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Messiah... He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices with joy because of the voice of the bridegroom.” (John 3:28-30)

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

[Jesus] left Judea and departed again to Galilee. He had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who is it that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him,, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.” (John 4:3-15)

Jacob’s Well and the Samaritan Woman as a Bride-to-Be

Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east. As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and lo, three flocks of sheep lying beside it.... The stone on the well's mouth was large, and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place upon the mouth of the well. Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran." He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" They said, "We know him." He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!" He said, "Behold, it is still high day, it is not time for the animals to be gathered together; water the sheep, and go, pasture them." But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep." While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. (Genesis 29:1-9)

¹ See Brant Pitre, Jesus the Bridegroom (New York: Image, 2014).

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The Reaction of the Disciples
Just then his disciples came. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” or “Why are you talking with her?” (John 4:27)

No Ordinary Bride: She is a Samaritan
So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day. And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sephar-va'im, and placed them in the cities of Sama'ria instead of the people of Israel; and they took possession of Sama'ria, and dwelt in its cities… (2 Kings 17:23-24)

No Ordinary Bride: She Has Had Five Husbands
Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly.” (John 4:16-17)

The Samaritan Woman and the Five Male ‘Gods’ of the Samaritans
So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the LORD. But every nation still made gods of its own, and put them in the shrines of the high places which the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities in which they dwelt; (1) the men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, (2) the men of Cuth made Nergal, (3) the men of Hamath made Ashi'ma, and (4) the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak; (5) and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelch, the gods of Sephar-vaim. They also feared the LORD, and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. So they feared the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. To this day they do according to the former manner…. (2 Kings 17:28-34)

The Samaritan Woman as a Symbol of the People of Israel
The LORD said to Hosea, “Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD.” So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim... (Hosea 1:2-3)

The Samaritan People are Betrothed to the Bridegroom Messiah
The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things.” Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.” …So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, “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... Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” (John 4:25-26, 28-30, 39-42)
Jesus Offers Her the Betrothal Gift of “Living Water”

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?” Jesus said to her, “Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.” (John 4:10-15)

The Miraculous Water of Jacob’s Well in Jewish Tradition

And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban, his mother’s brother… Jacob drew near and, with one of his arms, rolled the stone from the mouth of the well; and the well began to flow, and the waters came up before him, and he watered the flock of Laban… and it continued to flow for twenty years. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and raised his voice and wept. (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen 29:10-11)

The “Living Water” of Ritual Purification

For the unclean they shall take some ashes of the burnt sin offering, and living water shall be added in a vessel; then a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the tent… and upon the persons who were there, and upon him who touched the bone, or the slain, or the dead, or the grave… and he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and at evening he shall be clean. (Numbers 19:17-20)

The “Living Water” of the Jewish Bridal Bath

And Aseneth rose and stood on her feet. And the man [an angel] said to her, “Proceed unhindered into your second chamber and put off your black tunic of mourning, and the sackcloth put off your waist, and shake off those ashes from your head, and wash your face and your hands with living water (Greek hydati zōnti), and dress in a new linen robe (as yet) untouched and distinguished and gird your waist (with) the new twin girdle of your virginity. And come (back) to me, and I will tell you what I have to say.” And Aseneth hurried and went into her second chamber where the chests containing her ornaments were, and opened her coffer, and took a new linen robe, distinguished (and as yet) untouched, and undressed the black tunic of mourning and put off the sackcloth from her waist… And she shook off the ashes from her head, and washed her hands and her face with living water (Greek hydati zōnti). And she took an (as yet) untouched and distinguished linen veil and covered her head. (Joseph and Aseneth 14:12-17)

The “Living Water” From the Heart of Jesus

Jesus stood up and proclaimed, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and let him who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39)

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The Water from the Side of Jesus
After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the scripture), “I thirst.” 29 A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. 30 When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, “It is finished”; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. 31 Since it was the day of Preparation, in order to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath (for that sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. 32 So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him, 33 but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. 35 He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe…(John 19:28-35)

St. Augustine on the Samaritan Woman and the Church
It is pertinent… that this [Samaritan] woman, who bore the type of the church, comes from strangers, for the church was to come from the Gentiles, an alien from the race of the Jews. In that woman, then, let us hear ourselves, and in her acknowledge ourselves and in her give thanks to God for ourselves. (Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John, 15:10)

St. Methodius of Olympus on the Samaritan Woman
In the faith of the holy woman is pictured all the features of the church in true colors that do not grow old; for the way in which the woman denied a husband when she had many, is just the way the church denied many gods, like husbands, and left them and became betrothed to one Master in coming forth from the water. She had five husbands and the sixth she did not have; and leaving the five husbands of impiety, she now takes You, as the sixth, as she comes from the water, exceeding great joy and redemption…. The espoused church of the nations, then, left these things, and she hurries here to the well of the baptismal font and denies the things of the past, just as the woman of Samaria did; for she did not conceal what had formerly been true from Him who knows all in advance, but she said, “… Even if I formerly had husbands, I do not now wish to have these husbands which I did have; for now I possess You who have now taken me in Your net; and I am by faith rescued from the filth of my sins that I may receive exceeding great joy and redemption.” (Romanus Methodus, Kontakion on the Woman of Samaria 9:11-12, 14)

The Catechism on the Samaritan Woman
“If you knew the gift of God!” (John 4:10). The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him. (Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 2560)

3 Cited in Joel C. Elowsky, John (ACCS; Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 2:146-47.
4 Cited in Elowsky, John, 2:156-57 (slightly adapted).