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**God’s Condescension in Action:
The Nature of Divine Redemptive Love**

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Preface on Creeds

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed²

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

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² Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), accessed 6 November 2010, www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/history/nicene381.html.

Definition of Chalcedon³

Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . is perfect both in deity and in humanness; . . . actually God and actually man, with a rational soul and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these last days, for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his humanness. We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ-Son, Lord, only-begotten – in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the properties of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one person and in one reality. They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Cornelius Plantinga⁴

When we say Jesus is Lord, we are talking about God's greatest reversal, and we are saying that we trust not only in Jesus, but also his *program of dying and rising*. We trust his redemptive program in which self-expenditure leads to life, and not just to burnout. We trust that in his death Jesus absorbed the world's evil into himself, and cut the loop of vengeance, that in his resurrection Jesus led out all the captives of the world.

Introduction

In the incarnation, the eternal Son of the eternal Father, the Lord of all creation, humbled Himself and became a creature. He submitted Himself to His own creation, for the sake of the world and its inhabitants that He had made.⁵ This act of condescension did not include the forfeiture of His divinity; rather, to His full deity was added full humanity so that the incarnate Son is “perfect both in deity and in humanness . . . , of the same reality as God as far as His deity is

³ Definition of Chalcedon (451), accessed 6 November 2010, www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/history/creeds.chalcedon.txt.

⁴ “A Sermon for Advent: I Believe in Jesus Christ, God's Only Son, Our Lord,” in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2004), 76.

⁵ “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to what which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:10-11).

concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as His humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted.”⁶

That the sovereign of the universe, the one who spoke creation into existence, the one who still holds it all together by His powerful word, would (or even could) condescend to become a creature is the ultimate mystery.⁷ A greater act of submission could never be conceived. Although it does require a degree of humility to submit to one who is greater or to one’s equal, to submit to one’s inferior requires a great deal more. To submit to one who is infinitely inferior is the ultimate demonstration of humility.

Only the second person of the Trinity condescended to become human. Neither the Father nor the Spirit became a creature, but is divine humility limited to the incarnation? In a sermon on the incarnation, Cornelius Plantinga proposes that condescension is a family tradition for the Trinity. He asserts, “The Son of God just does what he sees his father doing. He empties himself and takes the form of a servant because that’s the way they do it in his family. And God exalts Jesus Christ and gives him the name above every name because that too is the Godly way—to exalt the humble, to get very enthusiastic about those who spend themselves for others.”⁸ According to Plantinga, the incarnation is a manifestation in history of the divine family’s longstanding tradition of condescension for the sake of the creation.

The goal of this paper is to provide some biblical support for Plantinga’s thesis, beginning with a brief examination of the text for

⁶ Plantinga, “Sermon for Advent,” 76.

⁷ J. I. Packer puts it this way: “The real difficulty, the supreme mystery with which the gospel confronts us, does not lie . . . in the Good Friday message of atonement, nor in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of Incarnation. The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man—that the second person of the Godhead became the ‘second man’ (1 Cor 15:47), determining human destiny, the second representative head of the race, and that he took humanity without the loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as he was human” (J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th Anniversary Edition [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 53).

⁸ Plantinga, “Sermon for Advent,” 77.

his sermon.⁹ Then two biblical stories will be read in defense of his claim, one from the life of Jesus and the other from the Pentateuch. The similarities between these two stories seem too great to be merely coincidental. It would seem that the Gospel writer intended his audience to read these stories together, or at least to hear the echoes of the Old Testament story in the New. Further, it is possible that John wants his readers to consider that Jesus behaved as He did on this day because He was following the example of His Father. Since Jesus understood the Scriptures to be about Him, it would seem that one means by which He grew in wisdom and knowledge (Luke 2:40, 52) was by studying the Scriptures. So, on this day, when He found himself beside a well in Samaria and He met a woman who came to draw water, He knew how to treat her because of His familiarity with a similar story in the Pentateuch.

But, first, it might be helpful to provide some New Testament exegetical support for reading these two texts in this way. We turn first to the biblical text for Plantinga's sermon, the Christological hymn in Philippians 2, and then to Jesus' instructions on the Christological reading of the Scriptures in John 5.

I. The Humility of God in the Incarnation

In his epistle to the Philippians, the apostle Paul encourages Christians to pursue unity in the church and to love one another. Specifically, he asks them to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves (Phil 2:3).”¹⁰ This lifestyle of humility evidences itself in self-sacrifice, in submission. The admonition to consider others better clearly does not necessarily mean that the others are better. In fact, the illustration of Christ would make little sense in that case.

Paul also does not encourage Christians to ignore or discount their own interests, their own needs. Instead, “Each of you should

⁹ The goal is not to prove this thesis but to provide evidence for it and then to illustrate its significance in the reading of two biblical stories. To say it another way, rather than providing sufficient evidence demanded to establish proof, this paper argues for the plausibility of Plantinga's thesis and then presents some of its implications.

¹⁰ Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical citations are from the New International Version (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 1984).

look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others,” he says (Phil 2:4). Paul is describing a lifestyle which does not demand one’s rights and privileges or disregard taking care of one’s needs; rather, it is a lifestyle marked by an appropriate and proper care of one’s own interests “but also” looks out for the interests of others.

To drive this point home to his audience, Paul uses an illustration. Paul’s use of Christ here is an example and when he does so, he seems to be reminding this church of something they already know. To make the point, Paul does not compose his own doctrinal statement; rather, he uses a Christological confession that was almost certainly already familiar to these believers. Gerald Hawthorne concludes, “Here is at least one thing that calls forth almost universal agreement. It is that vv. 6–11 constitute a beautiful example of a very early hymn of the Christian church.”¹¹ This hymn was likely part of the liturgy of the church, perhaps even part of the service on the day this letter was read publicly for the first time.¹² Thus, in this passage, Paul does not set out to write a high Christology, to defend the doctrine of Christ apologetically, or to engage in academic theologizing. His focus, rather, is ethical, practical, and liturgical.¹³ The audience is already grounded in the faith. They already know who Christ is.¹⁴ In order to drive home his instruction about humility, love, unity, and similar Christian virtues, Paul uses Christ as an

¹¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians*, electronic ed. (Dallas: Word, 1998 [Logos Library System; Word Biblical Commentary 43]), S. 76.

¹² Of course, this claim is speculative. No records of the order of worship survive. But if this is an early confession of faith, it is likely that the church would have used it as a common confession in a corporate worship setting.

¹³ All good theology is intensely practical. Perhaps that is one of the major methodological implications of this text. Paul here provides a model for practical theology, for liturgical theology that includes both confession and ethical implications.

¹⁴ One implication of this early confession of faith is that it provides evidence of a Nicene Christology during the New Testament era. Thus, the Council of Nicaea confirmed Christian orthodoxy, it did not choose between a smorgasbord of “Christianities.” See D. Jeffrey Bingham, “Development and Diversity in Early Christianity,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49 (2006): 45-66.

example. “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5).

In what way should Christians be like Christ? Paul’s answer here is simple, yet profoundly not simplistic. Christians should emulate His humility. Christ is the perfect example of one who did nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. He demonstrated His humility by considering others better than Himself.¹⁵ His actions demonstrated His attitudes. He was (and is) God, “in very nature” (Phil 2:6). He who is fully God “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing” (Phil 2:7).¹⁶ Jesus humbled Himself, He sacrificed Himself, He gave Himself, He poured Himself out, He submitted His own desires and interests for others, He condescended to become something He was not. To His divine nature He added a human nature. God himself became human; He who was “in very nature God” took “the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” The Creator of the universe became a creature, without ceasing to be the Creator. This is the wonder and mystery of

¹⁵ At first glance this seems a bit strong, perhaps even blasphemous. Does Paul really say that Christ considered others better than Himself? Of course, no one is greater than Christ, and no one knows that better than Christ. So then, how could He have considered others better than Himself? Note that He considered others greater does not mean that they are greater than He. But to treat those who are inferior to Him as greater, to submit Himself to them for their sakes is the height of, and perhaps even the definition of, humility. I am indebted to my friend and colleague Dorian Coover Cox for this insight.

¹⁶ Clearly, Paul is not affirming that Jesus ceased to be, or that he ceased to be God in the incarnation. Rather, he “emptied himself” (NASB) or “made himself nothing”(NIV) or “made himself of no reputation” (KJV and NKJV). Hawthorne explains, “Hence, the hymn states that Christ, who shared the nature of God, who was equal with God, ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (‘emptied himself’)! The emphatic position of ἑαυτόν (‘himself’) and the form of the verb strongly suggest that this act of ‘emptying’ was voluntary on the part of the preexistent Christ” (Hawthorne, *Philippians*, S. 85). In the incarnation, Jesus remained fully and completely divine; he gave up nothing of his deity. Instead, he gave himself. For a helpful survey of the interpretations of this text see Hawthorne (ibid.). He concludes: “The Philippian text does not say that Christ gave up anything. Rather it says that he added to himself that which he did not have before—‘the form of a servant,’ ‘the likeness of a man.’ Thus the implication is that at the incarnation Christ became more than God, if this is conceivable, not less than God.”

the incarnation; not simply that the second person of the triune God became fully human, but in doing so He remained fully God.¹⁷

So, Paul’s encouragement to the Philippians, and to all Christians, is to be like Christ. Consider others better than yourselves, humble yourselves (cf. James 4:10) and serve others, he says. Christians should follow the example of the one whose name they claim.¹⁸

This is one of the major ethical implications of the incarnation, found throughout the New Testament. Jesus Christ shows His followers how to live, how to treat others. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Romans, “God demonstrated his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). The apostle John explains that sacrifice is the essence of love, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16a; cf. 4:9). “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16) and “we love because he has first loved us” (1 John 4:19). John, too, emphasizes the ethical impact of this truth, “and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (1 John 3:16b). The New Testament writers interpret the incarnation as establishing or grounding their instructions about proper behavior of the members of the body of Christ.¹⁹

¹⁷ “Here are two mysteries for the price of one—the plurality of persons within the unity of God, and the union of Godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus. It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. ‘The Word became flesh’ (Jn 1:14): God became man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises; needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there was no illusion or deception in this: the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as this truth of the Incarnation” (Packer, *Knowing God*, 53).

¹⁸ This use of Christ as an example is not to propose an example model of the atonement. Rather, in His atoning work, Christ died as a substitute for sinners, the righteous for the unrighteous (2 Cor 5:21). But the substitutionary atonement of Christ is an example of humility, self-sacrifice, condescension for the sake of the hopeless and helpless.

¹⁹ Similarly, James rebukes showing favoritism (2:1-4) and insists that faith without works is dead, worthless, and useless (2:14-26). Many other biblical examples could be cited.

Paul, in Phil 2:6, goes one step further. Not only does he use Jesus as the example of humility for humans, he links Jesus' condescension in the incarnation to the character of God. Gerald Hawthorne writes:

Hence, in this connection the participial phrase that begins v.6—ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων (“who *being* in the form of God”), often wrongly translated as a concessive participle—“who *though* he was in the form of God (RSV, NASB, Beck, Confraternity, Goodspeed, Williams), is more correctly translated as a causative: “precisely *because* he was in the form of God he reckoned equality with God not as a matter of getting but of giving” (Moule, “Manhood,” 97). This then makes clear that contrary to whatever anyone may think about God, his true nature is characterized not by selfish grabbing, but by an open-handed giving.²⁰

Plantinga draws a similar conclusion: “The Greek text doesn't say that *although* he was in the form of God he emptied himself. What it says is, '*Being* in the form of God he emptied himself.' You might almost read, *because* he was in the form of God he emptied himself. Because he was in the form of God he took the form of a servant, washing the feet of disciples who would never dream of doing the same thing for each other.”²¹

Let me be clear: it is not my claim that this is the only way to read Phil 2:6. Many interpreters argue for a concessive force of the participial phrase.²² But it is legitimate to read it with a causative force. Such is a plausible and defensible reading. Nor is it my claim that the humility of God is defended from the exegesis of this one text. Rather, whether or not the participle has a concessive or a causative force is a decision made on theological grounds.²³ On what basis should one conclude that the active humility of Jesus is because

²⁰ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, S. 85.

²¹ Plantinga, “A Sermon for Advent,” 76. For a comparison of this hymn and Jesus' washing his disciples' feet, see Greg Perry, “To Know and Be Known: How Christ's Love Moves Us into Intimacy, Humility, and Risk. A Sermon on John 13:1-17,” in *All for Jesus: A Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Covenant Theological Seminary*, ed. Robert A. Peterson and Sean Michael Lucas (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2006), 371-76.

²² See, for example, Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 634-35.

²³ All exegetical decisions are informed by theology. It could hardly be otherwise.

He is God? Such a decision must be informed by the teaching of the Scriptures, since no text should be interpreted disconnected from the rest of the canon.

We turn now to the Gospel of John, to a text in which Jesus defends himself to His critics and gives them instructions on how to read the Bible. He rebukes their hermeneutical approach, pointing out their failure to read the Bible with the correct theological perspective.

II. The Son's Works Emulate the Father's Works

In the fifth chapter of his gospel, John records a healing miracle of Jesus. Like many of His miracles, this healing occurred on the Sabbath and as regularly happened when Jesus healed on the Sabbath, there were objections and opposition from the Jewish leaders.²⁴ “Because Jesus was doing these kinds of things on the Sabbath,” John says, “the Jews persecuted Him” (John 5:16).²⁵ In this case, Jesus’ response to His critics was direct and clear: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working” (John 5:17). In this statement, Jesus affirms several things. He claims that the Father’s work is constant. Thus, it would seem, the Father is working even on the Sabbath. Jesus also affirms a consistency between His work and the work of the Father. In short, Jesus seems to link His work, even on the Sabbath, with the work of the Father.

His answer infuriated His hearers: “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God” (John 5:18). They clearly recognized the implications of what He said. If Jesus was claiming here to be the Father and that He (the Father) was working, there likely would not have been as strong a

²⁴ John refers to the opposition as “the Jews” (5:10, 15, 16, 18). It would seem that the opposition was particularly coming from the Jewish leaders. It would be inappropriate to see here evidence of inappropriate anti-Jewish rhetoric in Jesus or John. Rather, the leaders of the Jews opposed him, and it is they who receive Jesus’ rebuke.

²⁵ It might seem to go without saying that it was not just what Jesus did that was seen as the problem, it was the time when He was doing these acts. It appears that Jesus was intentionally calling attention to Himself by His violation of the traditional Sabbath regulations.

reaction.²⁶ But His critics knew that Jesus was making the claim as a human, and that was the heart of the problem for them, for humans were not allowed to work on the Sabbath.²⁷ They also understood that Jesus was asserting his deity in making himself equal to God. Jesus was, implicitly, claiming to be both human and divine, to be God incarnate.

Jesus' answer to this objection is an extended teaching on how to read the Bible. The Scriptures, Jesus said, testify about Him (John 5:39). So, if they are read properly, the readers will see Him there and come to Him for life (John 5:40). He reminds them of the testimony of John the Baptist, who proclaimed Christ (John 5:31-36). He reminds them of Moses, who wrote about Christ (John 5:45-47). "If you believed Moses," Jesus said, "you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" (John 5:46-47). To those who respected Moses and thought themselves to be the authoritative interpreters of Moses, these were harsh words of rebuke. But it is not just John and Moses who testify about Christ, Jesus says, all the Scriptures point to Him.

Jesus claims that His critics are blind and deaf, that they have rebelled against God and the prophets He had sent, and that they had even rebelled against God's Son. They have been unable to hear God and to see Him, even though He has been speaking plainly and has been present in their midst. Jesus said, "You have neither heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:37-40).

This is a firm and strong rebuke of the way these Jewish scholars were reading the Scriptures. They considered themselves to be experts in the law, but Jesus points out to them that their approach was wrong

²⁶ This text, then, would seem to provide evidence of a trinitarian view of God. It would be hard to conceive the reason for the opposition on a unitarian or modalistic reading of this text.

²⁷ Whether Jesus was breaking the Mosaic Sabbath laws or only the traditions of the rabbis is not the issue here. The critics recognized that He was claiming a unique relationship with the Father and that this was the basis of His Sabbath work.

and, thus, their readings of the Scriptures were in error.²⁸ Their misunderstanding was that studying the Scriptures was the way to have eternal life, that the study of the Scriptures was the end in itself. The flaw in their approach is that the Scriptures are not the means of life, Jesus is. The Scriptures testify to Him. Those who read the Scriptures correctly recognize that and come to Him for life. To study the Scriptures without recognizing their proper aim is to misread the Scriptures.²⁹

Jesus' point is that the study of the Scriptures is not enough, they must be studied correctly. It is not enough to read the Word of God, it must be read properly. Every reading is an interpretation; the Scriptures do not simply speak for themselves. Since the Scriptures testify about Jesus, any reading that fails to hear Jesus, any interpretation that fails to elevate Jesus, any study that fails to focus on Jesus is incorrect and is worthy of judgment. These Jewish leaders were failing to read the Scriptures correctly. Thus, Jesus said that Moses himself will be called to accuse these rebels before the Father (John 5:45). They had elevated Moses and his law, thinking that in doing so they were honoring God. Instead, they were missing the whole point of the Scriptures, since Moses wrote about Jesus (John 5:46).³⁰ When God Himself, in the incarnation, came to them and spoke to them they failed to hear His voice. When God Himself came and appeared before them in Jesus of Nazareth, they failed to see Him. When God himself came and did His work in their midst they failed to perceive Him.

In John 5:19, Jesus claims that “the Son can do nothing by himself, he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” Jesus seems to be affirming that His actions are not only consistent with the works of His Father but that He learned what to do by watching His Father work. Of course, the eternal Son had been watching the Father work

²⁸ Thus, the Scriptures must be read with the theological conviction that they are about Christ. This presupposition must ground every reading of the text.

²⁹ Cf. 1 Tim 3:15 where Paul wrote to Timothy reminding him of what he had learned from infancy, that the Scriptures “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

³⁰ It is unlikely that Moses understood that he was speaking of Christ. But Moses, rightly interpreted, wrote of the Son.

prior to the incarnation. In fact, the Father and Son had been working together in perfect harmony. But when the Son humbled Himself and took on humanity, He had a new perspective on His Father. As He grew in wisdom (Luke 2:40, 52), as He studied the Scriptures, He watched His Father work.³¹ As Jesus read the Scriptures, He learned to recognize and to tell the story of God's work of creation and redemption.³² As He read the Old Testament stories, He recognized the hope of the culmination of redemption. Jesus read the Scriptures as God's testimony about Him and, it would seem, He patterned His life after the example of His Father.³³ In short, Jesus read the Scriptures as the story of God's work in the created order and He emulated His Father in what He did.³⁴

The Son is not the Father but in His works He reveals the Father because He is the Son of His Father. His critics got it right. They understood Jesus to be claiming to be in a unique relationship with the Father (John 5:18). He was. They should have believed Him, not simply because He said it, but because the Scriptures they were reading testify about Him. Their attention to the Scriptures was a

³¹ Of course, "watching" the Father work in the Scriptures is a metaphor for interpreting the Scriptures accurately as relating the work of God.

³² One of the many mysteries of the incarnation is the relationship between the divine and human attributes. Although omniscience is an attribute of deity, humans come to learn and develop in their understanding. That Jesus grew and learned is clearly taught in Scripture (Luke 2:40, 52; Heb 5:8). On the temptations of Jesus, Wayne Grudem concludes, "As difficult as it may be for us to understand, Scripture affirms that in these temptations Jesus gained an ability to understand and to help us in our temptations. 'Because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted' (Heb. 2:18)" (*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 537). It would seem that Jesus learned how to read and how to read the Bible the same way that all others humans learn.

³³ Article 1 of the Dallas Theological Seminary Doctrinal Statement says, "We believe that all the Scriptures center about the Lord Jesus Christ in His person and work in His first and second coming, and hence that no portion, even of the Old Testament, is properly read, or understood, until it leads to Him." John 5:39 is included in the list of biblical support. See the *Dallas Theological Seminary Catalog 2011-2012*, 187.

³⁴ His approach to making decisions was to ask, "What would Yahweh do?" It is, however, unlikely that Jesus wore a "WWYD" bracelet. It is also unlikely that any of His disciples wore "WWJD" bracelets.

good thing, but because they were not reading them properly, their study of the Scriptures brought them condemnation not life. Their Bible study did not contribute to faith and godliness because they were studying incorrectly.³⁵

III. Jesus Meets the Samaritan Woman at the Well of Sychar (John 4)

The healing miracle that precipitated this lesson on hermeneutics took place at the pool near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem (John 5:2). It follows, in John's narrative, another incident some time earlier at another body of water, a well near Sychar in Samaria (John 4:5). This story of the healing of an invalid at a pool evidences Jesus' mercy and compassion toward an outsider, one who was marginalized from the faith community because of his thirty-eight year disability. In the story recorded in John 4, Jesus met a woman at a well in Samaria. She too was an outsider because she was a woman, a Samaritan, and she was living with a man who was not her husband.³⁶ It would seem that the narrator's arrangement of these stories was not coincidental. In short, the reader of John 5 has the incident in John 4 in the background when reading Jesus' teaching about the relationship between His and the Father's works and Jesus' criticism of a non-Christological hermeneutic.

In John 4, Jesus has an extended conversation with this unnamed Samaritan woman.³⁷ Jesus and His disciples were on their way from Judea to Galilee.³⁸ On their way through Samaria Jesus stopped to

³⁵ Christian Bible study is not simply Bible study performed by Christians, it is Bible study which approaches the text confessing that Jesus is the Christ, that He is God in the flesh, that the hope of the resurrection and the regeneration of all things is found in Him. In short, Christian Bible study is not unbiased and objective, it is intentionally and confessionally convinced of the truth of Christian orthodoxy. Exegesis cannot be disconnected from theology; at least not Christian exegesis.

³⁶ It would seem that this woman was not only marginalized from the Jewish community but from the Samaritan religious community as well.

³⁷ Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 142, writes, "In the story of the woman at the well, John's Gospel arguably contains the longest and most elaborate narrative in the entire New Testament on the outsider theme."

³⁸ John says that Jesus "had to go through Samaria." The necessity seems connected to the "divine appointment" with this woman, not that the only or even [Footnote continued on next page ...]

rest at a well. John, who likely was with Jesus on this trip and thus was an eyewitness to some of these events, says that Jesus was tired (John 4:6), so He rested by the well by Himself while His disciples went into the town to buy food (John 4:9). While Jesus waited, a woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus engaged her in conversation, which was surprising to the woman, since “Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (John 4:9).³⁹ Further, this is not simply a Samaritan, but a Samaritan woman. Jesus’ private conversation with a Samaritan woman violated a number of social mores. Even in our day, in our much more enlightened culture, a private conversation between a Christian leader and a woman not his wife would lead some to question the leader’s wisdom and discretion, and perhaps even his theology. In the culture of this time, Jesus’ behavior would have been deemed inappropriate by almost everyone. That this is not a minor point in the story is seen by the disciples’ reaction when they return. John says that they “were surprised to find him talking with a woman” (John 4:27). The disciples seem more surprised that He was talking to a woman than that she was a Samaritan.

The conversation begins with the subject of water, which is not surprising, because of the setting. Jesus asks this woman to serve Him, to give Him a drink of water. The woman apparently understood some of the implications of Jesus’ request. She expresses surprise that He would be unaware of the cultural expectations. She reminds him that there is conflict between Jews and Samaritans. When Jesus explains that if she really understood who He was she would have asked Him for living water, the woman is even more confused. She does, however, seem to understand that Jesus was claiming to be able to provide something she desperately needed. She finally asks for the

usual way to get from Judea to Galilee was to go through Samaria. In John’s gospel, the theme of divine intention and the accomplishing of God’s plan commonly occur. Spina’s conclusion seems accurate: “Granted, it’s difficult to see anything transparently providential right away; yet, by the end of the story, that dimension must surely be considered. Supporting this claim, this same Greek word [dei] elsewhere in John’s Gospel underscores a number of ‘necessities’ that are anything but ordinary (see John 3:7, 14, 30; 4:20, 24; 9:4; 10:16; 12:34; 20:9)” (*Faith of the Outsider*, 145).

³⁹ Whether or not the NIV reading is adopted or the alternative, “Jews do not use dishes Samaritans have used,” the point remains the same. There was significant conflict between Jews and Samaritans; there was blame on both sides.

water Jesus is offering her. His intention seems clear, to use water as a means of focusing her attention on Him. The water is not the end, it is a means to a much more important end. If all divine revelation points to Christ, then things like food and water would be opportunities to recognize the giver of every good gift and the gift itself.⁴⁰

Rather than providing what she requests, and what He had implicitly encouraged her to desire, Jesus then told her to call her husband (John 4:16). She admits that she is not married and is stunned when Jesus is able to relate her marital history of five husbands and a current live-in relationship with a man not her husband. She is convinced that He is a prophet, one who is able to see what humans cannot normally see. Eventually she confesses her belief that when the Messiah comes, He will explain everything. In clear and unambiguous terms, Jesus declares to her that He is the Messiah (John 4:26).⁴¹

At that time the disciples returned and were surprised to see Jesus talking with a woman, but none of them said anything to Him about it (John 4:27). The woman left to return to her village, leaving her water jar at the well. Her testimony to the people of the village is, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” (John 4:29). The question seems rhetorical, since there are several indications in the narrative that she does believe in Him. Many from the village accompany her back to the well where Jesus and the disciples wait.

Meanwhile, the disciples are trying to get Jesus to eat. He refuses, and instead calls their attention to the fields ripe for harvest (John 4:34-38). There is little reason to think that the disciples understand what he was saying. The woman’s confusion about “living water” seems matched by their confusion about “ripe fields.”

⁴⁰ “I am the bread of life,” Jesus said (John 6:35). As the Creator He is the source of bread but He is also the bread itself. Of course, the “bread of life” has several levels of meaning. Jesus is the source of the actual food we eat to sustain life and He is life itself. He is also the source of living water, the water of life, the Holy Spirit.

⁴¹ Such clarity of confession of His Messiahship is rare in the Gospels. Seldom does Jesus speak so explicitly and directly. Later, He will speak similarly to Pilate (cf. John 18:37), another outsider to the people of faith and the promises of God.

Many of the Samaritans believed in Jesus, because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did" (John 4:39). They urged Jesus to stay with them so He spent two days in their village. He spent two days in the Samaritan village.⁴² The disciples also, apparently, spent two days in the Samaritan village. The story ends with the testimony of the Samaritan believers: "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (John 4:42).

As this story begins, Jesus is resting by a body of water. The readers know something that most of the characters in the story do not know, that He was here by necessity, as part of the divine plan (John 4:4).⁴³ This is not an accidental encounter between Jesus and a woman. Could it be that John intends his readers to connect this story to the revealed plan of God, to another story of God's redemptive encounter with a woman? Could it be that Jesus was not only aware of that story but He intentionally re-enacted it on this day? God having a conversation with a woman at a body of water, bringing salvation to her, condescending to relate to her when no one else would, providing for her needs, and even using her to bring others to faith – did such a thing ever happen in redemptive history prior to the time of Jesus?

⁴² The repetition is for emphasis. This is a stunning reversal of expected social behavior. Not only are social mores being shattered, so our deeply-held stereotypes. These Samaritans practiced hospitality, inviting Jesus to stay with them. Jesus' experiences with the Jews were frequently less pleasant (cf. John 5:18; 7:1). But perhaps more surprising is that Jesus and his disciples accepted the hospitality of the Samaritans. It is unlikely that in two days in the town that they could have avoided using dishes used by the Samaritans (cf. John 4:9), not to mention having contact with the Samaritans in the town. In fact, the point seems to be that Jesus had a great deal of interaction and contact with these Samaritans and that such contact was good and worthy of emulation by His followers.

⁴³ It could be that even Jesus is unaware of His divine appointment with this woman. J. I. Packer writes, "The Word had become flesh: a real human baby. He had not ceased to be God; he was no less God then than before; but he had begun to be a man. He was not now God *minus* some elements of his deity, but God *plus* all that he had made his own by taking manhood to himself. He who made man was now learning what it felt like to be man" (*Knowing God*, 57).

IV. Yahweh Meets Hagar at the Spring on the Road to Shur (Gen 16)

In Gen 16, Moses records a story from the life of the patriarch Abram. After a decade in the land of Canaan, during which Abram has been waiting patiently for God to begin to build a nation through him, Sarai is still childless. Abram and Sarai became more and more concerned about the ticking of Sarai's biological clock. She concluded, correctly, that "the LORD has kept me from having children" (Gen 16:2). She then conceived a plan; she will offer her maid to Abram as a surrogate and build a family through her.

Sarai's evaluation of the cause of the situation is accurate. The LORD is the cause of her childlessness. The flaw is in her plan to give her maidservant to her husband and to attempt to build a family through her. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, Abram agreed with her plan and took Hagar the Egyptian maidservant as his wife (Gen 16:3).⁴⁴ He

⁴⁴ On the other hand, Abram's behavior here might not be surprising at all. He has demonstrated himself to be a man who cared more about himself than others, one who looks for the easy way out of conflict without consideration for the effects of his decisions on others. Attempts to absolve Abram of guilt in this incident abound. Some have proposed that since the law which prohibits adultery had not yet been given, adultery is not yet a sin, or at least Abram could not be aware that it is wrong. But this story is written not from the perspective of Abram's day, but in the context of the exodus. The audience in that context did know that adultery is wrong and that Abram's behavior here is not an act of faith. Furthermore, the narrator indicates that Hagar became Abram's wife, so there was no adultery. Abram is a polygamist. Polygamy was widely practiced and not forbidden to the people of God. But, it must be noted, the problem here is not polygamy or adultery but Abram's mistreatment of his wife and unborn child.

In over a decade of teaching this material, I have never had a female student defend Abram's behavior. The attempts to defend Abram have always come from men. I do not know if this gender divide is significant or representative, but I believe that my female students have it right.

For a representative defense of Abram, see Augustine, *City of God* 16.25: "Abraham is in no way to be branded as guilty concerning this concubine. For he dealt with her for the begetting of progeny, not for the gratification of lust, and not to insult her but to obey his wife, who supposed it would be solace of her barrenness if she could make use of the fruitful womb of her handmaid to supply the defect of her own nature. By that law of which the apostle says, 'Likewise also the husband has not power of his own body, but the wife' [I Cor 7:4]. Sarah could, as a wife, do benefit to him through childbearing by another, when she could not do so in her own person. Here there is no wanton lust, no crude lewdness. The handmaid is [Footnote continued on next page ...]

slept with her and she conceived a child.⁴⁵ The echoes of Gen 3 in this story seem deliberate. As in the fall narrative, the man “listened to his wife,” and his wife “took and gave to her husband.”⁴⁶ As in the fall narrative, the result of this decision has immediate and long term tragic consequences.

Immediately, things are different in Abram’s family. When Hagar discovers she is pregnant she begins to despise Sarai. Sarai rebukes Abram, blaming him for this conflict. She tells him, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. . . . May the LORD judge between you and me” (Gen 16:5). She is correct. It was Abram’s actions which resulted in Hagar’s pregnancy. But, as is usually the case when humans play the “blame game,” she ignores her own culpability in the plan.

How will Abram respond to Sarai’s implicit request to do something about the conflict between the two wives? His reply is chilling: “ ‘Your servant is in your hands,’ Abram said. ‘Do with her

delivered to the husband by the wife for the sake of progeny and is received by the husband for the sake of progeny, each seeking not guilty excess but natural fruit. Thus the pregnant bondwoman despised her barren mistress, and Sarah, with womanly jealousy, rather laid the blame of this on her husband. Yet even then Abraham showed that he was not a slavish lover but a free begetter of children and that in using Hagar he had guarded the chastity of Sarah his wife and had gratified her will and not his own. He had received her without seeking her, gone in to her without being attached, impregnated without loving her. For he says, ‘Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please.’ Here is a man able to treat different women as they require—his wife temperately, his handmaid compliantly, neither intemperately!’ (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, ed. Thomas Oden, vol. 2, *Genesis 12-50*, ed. Mark Sheridan [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002], 45).

⁴⁵ The implication seems to be that after ten years of trying to conceive a child with Sarai, one attempt with Hagar results in pregnancy.

⁴⁶ See Wenham, who writes, “It is clear from the outset that the narrator does not endorse Sarai’s scheme. Her very first words blame her creator for her predicament, suggesting that she is in her own way going to sort out God’s mistakes, hardly a model of piety. Then in the deliberate echoes of Gen 3, Abram ‘obeying his wife,’ Sarai ‘taking and giving to her husband,’ the narrator suggests we are witnessing a rerun of the fall. Though the consequences are not as calamitous as the disobedience in Eden, they were sufficient to abort Sarai’s enterprise had not the Lord intervened to salvage the situation” (Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, electronic ed. [Dallas: Word, 1998; (Logos Library System; Word Biblical Commentary 2)], S. 12).

whatever you think best' ” (Gen 16:6a). It is very difficult to read this description of Abram’s behavior charitably, since the narrator goes on to tell us that Sarai mistreated Hagar (Gen 16:6b). Surely Abram knew, or should have known, that this would have been the result. If he could not have known that Sarai would treat Hagar cruelly, he surely knew it when it happened.⁴⁷ There is no hint in the narrative that Abram did anything to protect Hagar. Remember, this is not simply Sarai’s or Abram’s servant. Hagar is Abram’s wife and she is pregnant with Abram’s son.⁴⁸

Hagar endured the abuse for as long as she could but eventually she ran away to the desert. At a spring in the desert on the road to Shur, on the way back to Egypt, she was met by “the angel of the LORD” (Gen 16:7).

Although there are several ways to interpret the identity of the “angel of the Lord,” what is beyond question is that this messenger is connected to Yahweh and is here as part of the divine plan. The narrator intends the reader to recognize this as an act of Yahweh. This character could be an angel, a messenger sent by Yahweh to Hagar.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ There is no way to justify Abram by pointing out that it was Sarai who mistreated Hagar not Abram. Abram is the patriarch. This is his family and he is responsible for ruling justly. If someone under his care is mistreated, is he not culpable? Furthermore, Hagar is no longer simply the servant of Sarai. She is Abram’s wife (Gen 16:3) and she is bearing Abram’s child. Abram is not ignorant of her pregnancy.

⁴⁸ The readers know something that no other character in the story knows, to this point. Hagar is not simply bearing Abram’s child, she is carrying his son.

⁴⁹ For a representative defense of the view that the angel of the Lord is an angel, see Didymus the Blind, *On Genesis 249*. He explains, “She names him ‘Lord’ and ‘God.’ It is not too much of a stretch to say that the angel was not in the service of his own words but of God’s, as are also the prophets. For, in a certain sense, when angels exercise their ministry and when they foretell the future, they do the work of prophets. The name *angel* indicates an activity, not a substance; the same is true of the name *prophet*. [Since] the angel was speaking the words of God, Hagar called him God because of the One who lived in him. Similarly, when Isaiah prophecies, he sometimes speaks in his own person, as a man who has within himself the prophetic spirit, and he sometimes, as it were, makes God the character who speaks, without adding ‘says the Lord.’ For example, he writes, ‘I made the earth and created man upon it’ [Isa 45:12], but (it is he himself speaking) as one sent by the Lord he proclaims, ‘Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken’ [Isa 1:2]. We say this to show that the words of Isaiah are not all spoken as though he were merely an intermediary but that participation in God [Footnote continued on next page ...]

In that case, when the angel speaks, he is communicating the message sent by God. But it would be better to understand this “angel” as Yahweh himself, for the narrator tells us that Hagar gave a name to the LORD who appeared and spoke to her (Gen 16:13). In short, this seems to be a theophany, an appearance of God on earth in human form. The story reveals a God who condescends to enter into the life experience of this Egyptian slave woman. Whether God sent a messenger or He himself left heaven to come to earth in the form of a being that this woman can see and hear, the Creator has humbled himself to care for a creature on earth, to bless a creature. But this is not simply any creature; this is Hagar, an Egyptian slave woman, the unwanted wife of the patriarch Abram.⁵⁰

In the Abram stories, we have been introduced to a man chosen by God to be the mediator of blessings to all peoples on earth (Gen 12:3). In a later chapter, Abram’s name will be changed to Abraham by Yahweh, because “I have made you the father of many nations” (Gen 17:5).⁵¹ In the story in Gen 16, the mother of one of those nations is blessed by God. This blessed person is not a descendent of Abram, she is an Egyptian. She is a woman, a servant of the patriarch’s wife who, because of the patriarch’s actions, will be elevated to the status of favored wife in his household.⁵² She is, after

confers also the authority of God; and because of God’s dwelling in them, those who share in him are called gods. This is so true that an angel speaking to Moses was also called God. It is written in fact: And the angel of the Lord called him and said to him. ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob’ [Exod 34:6, LXX]. If one looks at the minister, these are words of angels, but if one looks at the sense, they are words of God” (*Genesis 12-50*, 49).

⁵⁰ This is not some decontextualized or generic appearance of God. He came to earth (or sent a representative to earth) at a specific time in a specific place in a specific form to appear to a specific person.

⁵¹ At this time in the story, Abraham is not yet the father of many nations. He is only the father of Ishmael. But, the promises of God are sure, so this one can be stated as if it is already accomplished. Also not to be missed is that this promise of Abraham’s fruitfulness (Gen 17:6) comes when he is 99 years old. Abraham’s fruitful years of producing children are delayed until he is well into his second century (cf. Gen 25:1-6; where the narrator names six sons and refers to the additional sons of his concubines).

⁵² It is almost universally acknowledged that Hagar joined the patriarch’s family during Abram’s brief sojourn in Egypt (Gen 12:10-20). Perhaps she was given to Sarai when she was taken into the Pharaoh’s household (Gen 12:15-16).
[Footnote continued on next page ...]

all, the only one of Abram's wives to this point to provide him a son and it will be nearly fourteen years before Sarah bears Isaac (Gen 16:16; cf. 17:1; cf. 21:5).

Why is Hagar a recipient of God's intervention here? The answer seems simple: she is bearing Abram's child.⁵³ Abram was chosen by God to be a mediator of God's blessing to all peoples. But Abram is not even willing to preserve the life of his unborn child. God, who sees all, condescends to intervene and to protect this child and her mother from harm.

The angel found Hagar near a spring in the desert. He asked her where she has come from and where she is going (Gen 16:8). This conversation is clearly not so that the angel can gather information from Hagar. God already knows why Hagar is here. He is, after all, the God who sees everything.⁵⁴ Further, the angel's greeting, "Hagar,

Thus, this was not the first time that Hagar was elevated and blessed in the context of Abram's sin. His trip to Egypt, and his lie about his marital status in order to avoid any harm to himself (Gen 12:12-13) resulted in Hagar joining the family of God's blessing. Now, pregnant with Abram's son, she will be elevated again, not because of Abram's great faith, but because of God's great grace.

⁵³ Although it might be possible to justify Abram's behavior in agreeing to sleep with this woman, even though I do not think so, there is no way to justify him when he allows his wife Sarai to mistreat the mother of his unborn child and to drive her away from the family. My purpose is not the "bash" Abram for his sin. It is, rather, to recognize how much in need of grace our father Abraham was. He was not blessed by God because of his faithfulness and obedience to God. He was blessed by a gracious God for reasons known only to God.

⁵⁴ The parallels to God's question to Adam ("Where are you?") in Genesis 3 and to Cain (Where is your brother?) in Genesis 4 seem obvious. Wenham writes: "For the first time, Hagar is addressed by name and is called 'Sarai's maid.' This may have surprised Hagar. How could a stranger have known about her identity? The reader, knowing that the stranger is the angel of the Lord, is not surprised. But the question that follows, 'Where have you come from?' although sounding quite natural to Hagar, strikes the reader as rhetorical. It is as unnecessary as the Lord asking Adam "'where are you?' (3:9) or Cain 'where is Abel?' (4:9). This is, in fact, the first time the Lord has asked someone their whereabouts since Gen 4, and it emphasizes the parallel between this story and those earlier ones.

"But whereas Adam and Cain prevaricated, Hagar is perfectly honest in her answer, 'I am running away from Sarai, my mistress.' She admits that she is a runaway slave, and her chosen verb 'run away' implies she has very good reason to escape (cf. v 6)" (Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, S. 9).

[Footnote continued on next page ...]

servant of Sarai” (Gen 16:8), indicates that he already knows her name and where she has come from. The angel instructs Hagar to return to the home of her mistress and to submit to her.⁵⁵ The implication seems to be that the God who sees everything will take care of her. The appearance of God and his promises to her imply that Hagar should trust Him in the future.⁵⁶

After giving these instructions, the angel of the LORD added several words of blessing. Hagar hears the words: “I will so increase your descendents that they will be too numerous to count” (Gen 16:10). These are very similar to the words Abram had heard from Yahweh: “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. . . . so shall your offspring be” (Gen 15:5). The promise of innumerable descendents for Abram is now repeated for the son of the slave woman. Why? Because this as yet unborn child is a descendent of Abram and his mother is the wife of the patriarch (cf. Gen 17:20).

The angel continued: “You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in

The contrast in response is stunning. Whereas Adam and Cain, when confronted by God had refused to answer or had blamed others, Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, answered honestly. Her faithfulness in contrast to the faithlessness of Abram and Sarai is also clear.

⁵⁵ This text has sometimes been used to develop the principle that a woman in an abusive relationship must return to the abuser and submit to him. Such an interpretation is unconscionable. This text is not teaching abused spouses to submit to their abuser anymore than it is teaching that the children of the patriarch Abraham should practice polygamy. A commitment to life and to protection of the helpless (widows, orphans, strangers, and slaves seem to receive special protection from God and should also receive such from God’s people) means that we should protect those who are being abused, even to the point of removing them from abuse and giving them a place to stay where they will be safe. Nor does this story prove that God will always protect the abused (and their children) in such conditions, as the graves of many who were killed by their abusers silently testify.

⁵⁶ That Hagar apparently obediently returns to her mistress demonstrates her faith in Yahweh, in the God who sees.

hostility toward all his brothers” (Gen 16:11-12).⁵⁷ This child’s life will be marked by conflict and hostility. But this child bears the name of the God who hears. Allen Ross comments on the theological significance of the name Ishmael: “God *sees* distress and affliction, and He *hears*. Sarai should have known this. Since God knew Sarai was barren, she should have cried out to the Lord. Instead she had to learn a lesson the hard way—from the experience of a despised slave-wife who, ironically, came back with a faith experience. How Abram must have been rebuked when Hagar said God told her to name her son Ishmael, ‘God hears.’”⁵⁸

When the angel finished speaking, Hagar gave a “name to the LORD who spoke to her” (Gen 16:13). It would seem that the narrator is thus identifying the one who spoke as the LORD.⁵⁹ There are several things significant about this act of naming. First, in the book of Genesis, naming has particular importance. The one who names exercises dominion over the one named.⁶⁰ In this story, the Creator, Yahweh, is infinitely greater than the creature. Yet it is the greater who condescends to come to the aid of the lesser. It is the greater who humbles Himself, who submits His rights, and grants the privilege of naming to the inferior.⁶¹ The greater one gives up the rights and

⁵⁷ Readers of the New Testament might hear here echoes of this angelic announcement in another angel’s message to Mary: “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus” (Luke 1:31).

⁵⁸ Ross, “Genesis,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, electronic ed. (Dallas: Word, 1998 [Logos Library System]), S. 57.

⁵⁹ That the “angel of the Lord” in Gen 16 seems to be Yahweh himself does not necessarily mean that every occurrence of this designation in the Hebrew Scriptures is thus to be understood this way. Each case should be examined in its own context.

⁶⁰ See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 462: “The fact that Adam gave names to all the animals (Gen. 2:19-20) indicated Adam’s authority over the animal kingdom, because in Old Testament thought the right to name someone implied authority over that person (this is seen both when God gives names to people such as Abraham and Sarah, and when parents give names to their children).”

⁶¹ The writer of Hebrews makes a similar point about blessing. He argues that “the lesser person is blessed by the greater” (Heb 7:7). He explains that when Abram met Melchizedek and was blessed by him (Gen 14:19-20) and when Abram paid tithes to Melchizedek, this king and priest was greater than Abram. Thus, Melchizedek’s priesthood is greater than Levi’s and Aaron’s (Heb 7:9-19). When
[Footnote continued on next page ...]

privileges of His position to allow this subordinate to be honored. The greater abases Himself in order to elevate the inferior. Of course, the greater remains the one with all power and authority. The greater one does not cease to be greater in this act of condescension. When God humbles Himself in this way He does not cease to be God. For if He did, then the promises He makes and the name He is given would be a cruel joke.

It is not just that Hagar names God that is significant. So is the name she gives Yahweh. She names Him, “The God who sees me” (Gen 16:13). Yahweh is not just the God who sees. Hagar confesses that Yahweh is “the God who sees me.” The Creator of the universe, she says, has noticed her and has condescended to care for her. The lasting influence of this name is such, the narrator notes, that the well between Kadesh and Bered is called “Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there” (Gen 16:14). Apparently Hagar’s influence was so great that generations later, this place retained the name she had given it.⁶² In the stories of the patriarchs, the narrator often calls attention to the names given to places, particularly when the places are named after the God of the patriarchs. But God’s condescension to Hagar, to allow her to name him, is unique in the biblical story.⁶³

God called Abram and sent him to the land of promise, it was not because there was no worship of God in the land. One greater than Abram was already there. And this greater one was both a priest and king. Although Abram would function as a priest, mediating God’s blessing to others, he would never be a king. He was a nomad in the land of promise. The only land to which he had title was a burial plot (cf. Gen 23).

⁶² Note that after Abraham’s death, Isaac makes his home near Beer Lahoi Roi (Gen 25:11).

⁶³ Abraham called the place where God provided a ram as a substitute sacrifice for his son Isaac, “The LORD will provide” (Gen 22:14). Jacob recognized the presence of God at the place where he saw the vision of the angels ascending and descending on a ladder and he called the place “Bethel,” or “house of God” (Gen 28:19). After the night of wrestling with the man, Jacob called the place “Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared’ ” (Gen 32:30). Moses called the altar he constructed after the defeat of the Amalekites, “The LORD is my banner” (Exod 17:15).

The LORD’s zeal to protect his name is clearly stated in the third commandment, “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name” (Exod 20:7) and in the later statement, “Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is [Footnote continued on next page ...]

This story ends suddenly. Many questions remain unanswered. But what is clear is that Hagar returned to Abram and Sarai. By doing so she demonstrated her faith in the God who had appeared to her. As the messenger had declared, she bore a son and Abram gave him the name Ishmael. Thus, he demonstrated his faith in the God who had appeared to Hagar and probably also his trust in her.

V. Some Similarities in the Two Stories

The similarities between these two stories are stunning. The New Testament story elevates most of the details of the Old Testament story, but in both cases, God condescends to engage in a redemptive encounter with a daughter of Eve, the mother of all the living (Gen 3:20).⁶⁴ Both Hagar and the unnamed Samaritan woman are outcasts,

Jealous, is a jealous God” (Exod 34:14). The strong connection between Yahweh and His name is also seen in the use of His name as a metonymy for Yahweh Himself, “Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth” (Psa 124:8). That this God, who takes the protection, preservation, and purity of his name so seriously would allow Himself to be named by this Egyptian slave woman, the estranged and pregnant wife of the patriarch Abraham indicates His condescension to her. That Yahweh changes the name of Abram (to Abraham) and Sarai (to Sarah) in Gen 17, without any indication that He changed Hagar’s name heightens the emphasis on His graciousness to Hagar. Note that the reason for the change of name for Abraham and Sarah seems to be their lack of faith in the promises of Yahweh. The obedience of Hagar to the message from the angel of the LORD and the retention of her given name seems to evidence her faith in Yahweh.

⁶⁴ Again, this point is not dependent upon the interpretation that the angel of the LORD is Yahweh himself. Even if God sent a messenger, an ambassador, a representative, He still is the one who acts on behalf of Hagar and He does so in an unusual and unexpected way. This is almost beyond conception; the sovereign Lord of the universe condescends to meet the needs of this pregnant, Egyptian, slave woman. All the while the patriarch Abraham, the father of all who believe, is not only not active in preserving her life and the life of his unborn child, he is passively (at least) the reason why she needs divine protection and provision.

A few examples of reading Gen 16 and John 4 together have been found. Keith Krell, “Beware of Shortcuts,” http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=4513, accessed 27 September 2007, sees a connection between John 4 and Genesis 16 based upon his identification of the Angel of the LORD as the preincarnate Christ. He notes, “If this is Jesus, this is similar to the time in John 4 when Jesus sat with the woman at the well. Both women were not Jews and both were sexually sinful women. Yet, Jesus met them both with grace and mercy.” Although I do not think it is helpful to try to identify the person of the godhead who appeared to Hagar, I do agree that the two stories are similar.

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outsiders to the people of faith. Both have husband problems. Hagar has been mistreated, rejected, and sent away by her husband. The narrator does not tell us why the Samaritan woman has had five husbands and it would be speculative to assume whether desertion, divorce, or death were the cause. Both have been involved in inappropriate sexual relationships.⁶⁵ Both are at a source of water, drawing water for themselves and their families.⁶⁶ Both are fleeing from something. Hagar is fleeing an abusive relationship. The Samaritan woman seems to be fleeing her past and is almost certainly fleeing the judgmental citizens of her village.⁶⁷ Both have something to hide. Both bear shame and guilt, some of it is even deserved. Both appear to have “ears to hear” the voice of God, they are sensitive to God. Both listen to the voice of God when He speaks. Both recognize

Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Woman at the Well,” www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2357, accessed 27 September 2010, observes the similarities to Gen 16, 24, and 29, important events which occurred at a well.

Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis*, www.biblebelievers.com/Pink/Gleanings_Genesis/genesis_21.htm, accessed 27 September 2010, connects the well in Gen 16 with “the living Water” in John 4.

Particularly interesting is John T. Spike’s explanation of the painting by the 17th century Italian artist Andrea Sacchi, “Hagar and Ishmael.” Spike explains: “The Old Testament chronicle becomes a kind of Easter story in Sacchi’s telling. Hagar’s fervent prayers at the side of Ishmael, supine on a white linen with his arms outstretched, are joyfully interrupted by the angel who points with both hands towards the life-giving water only a few steps away. The darkness and desolation behind the boy gives way, on the angel’s side, to warm, redolent air and soft green foliage. Faithful Hagar, blessed although she is a pagan, is thus portrayed as a Genesis antecedent of the Samaritan woman to whom Christ said at the well, ‘whoever drinks of this water shall thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I give shall never thirst’ (John 4:26).” <http://www.theitalians.com.au/theitalians/Detail.cfm?IRN=161277&ViewID=2>, accessed 27 September 2010.

⁶⁵ Although the narrator does not condemn Abraham or Sarai explicitly for their behavior in Gen 16, it would seem that, at the very least, they have demonstrated a lack of faith in the promises of Yahweh.

⁶⁶ Hagar’s family includes the child she is bearing. The Samaritan woman’s family includes the man with whom she is living, and perhaps children.

⁶⁷ Even in our more “enlightened” culture, a woman who has been married five times and is now living with a man not her husband would not be viewed as a paragon of virtue and her lifestyle would likely be the subject of some discussion, especially among Christians.

that the one speaking is God, and both name Him, “The God Who Sees Me.” Hagar explicitly gives Yahweh that name. The Samaritan woman recognizes that Jesus knows her secret thoughts and deeds. She said of Him, “He told me everything I ever did” (John 4:39). Both express faith in God and both act on their faith in Him. Hagar returns to Abram’s household. The Samaritan woman returns to her village. Both return to their previous “home,” which in neither case is really their home at all. Both are blessed by God. Both are beneficiaries of God’s grace. Both share their stories with others and others come to faith in God through them. When Hagar returns to Abram, he apparently believes her because when the child is born, Abram names him Ishmael, the name given him by the God who sees. Many Samaritans believe in Jesus because of this woman’s testimony. Both are used by God to rebuke and encourage the faith of great men. It is hard to miss the contrast between Hagar and Abram in this story. Hagar hears from God and she believes. Abram is still struggling to obey God. It is also hard to miss the contrast between the Samaritan woman and the disciples. She hears from Jesus and believes. They are still struggling to understand who Jesus is.⁶⁸

It is possible, I guess, that these similarities between these stories are merely coincidental. On the other hand, the similarities might be the very point the divine author (and perhaps the human author, John) intends in the telling of the two stories. I think the latter is more likely. Ironically, it seems that there is one other point of similarity between these two women. Both are largely overlooked by readers of the biblical story. Many times, the Hagar story is read within the context of the Abraham stories as telling us something about Abraham. Such a reading is appropriate, but it would seem that the focus in the Abraham stories is not primarily Abraham at all, but Abraham’s God. The patriarch, in this story, does not look very much like a man of faith worth emulating. He shows little concern for his

⁶⁸ Even at the end of the Gospel of John the disciples are still struggling with their understanding of Jesus. (See their questions in John 14.) John records their deliberation together: “They kept asking, ‘What does he mean by ‘a little while?’ We don’t understand what he is saying’ ” (John 16:18). Even after His death and resurrection, they seemed to have a hard time recognizing Jesus, thinking Him to be a ghost (cf. Luke 24:36-37). The Samaritan woman seems to have understood that Jesus is the Messiah, the one of whom Moses spoke.

unborn child. His concern seems to be to avoid having to face the truth that what he did in sleeping with Hagar did not turn out the way he had hoped. So, “out of sight out of mind” seems to be his way of dealing with the problem. But God, who had promised to bless all people on earth through Abraham, intervenes to preserve Abraham’s child so that he can build a great nation through Ishmael. Similarly, the story of the Samaritan woman is often used to draw principles for evangelism, and that would seem appropriate. It is also an important text for developing a theology of worship.⁶⁹ It seems legitimate to read it as an example of how Jesus treated women.⁷⁰ What is seldom appreciated by Bible readers is that this woman, an outsider in all kinds of ways, encounters the incarnate Son of God and becomes a believer.⁷¹ She then responds evangelistically, telling everyone she can about this one she met. Perhaps most surprisingly, people believe her and go to meet Jesus themselves. They told her, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for

⁶⁹ God is seeking a specific kind of worshippers, those who worship in Spirit and truth. This seems to indicate, at the very least, that the Spirit is necessary for true worship. Perhaps the only people who can worship in Spirit and truth are those who are indwelt and empowered by the Spirit of God. Thus, the Church’s function is to be a worshipping community. It is made up of those who worship the God who is in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a distinctive function of the Church in this age. None other than those who are part of the body of Christ by means of the work of the Spirit of God can be spiritual worshippers.

⁷⁰ Although this story does illustrate how Jesus related to women, it would seem best not to use this story to develop principles for such interaction today. This conversation, although it took place in public, was a private conversation without eyewitnesses.

⁷¹ “It is difficult to miss the implication that the Samaritan woman, the quintessential outsider in this particular episode, is on the verge of becoming an insider, while the natural insiders, none other than Jesus’ own disciples, are depicted as awkward and puzzled. They are still insiders, of course, but a true understanding of the really important matters raised in the previous conversation seems to have alluded them completely. The Samaritan woman has hurried back to her town without paying the slightest attention to her (or her household’s) need for water. Ordinary thirst no longer seems to matter; for her, another thirst is about to be slaked. In contrast, the disciples have been concentrating only on the rumble in their stomachs” (Spina, *Faith of the Outsider*, 156).

ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).⁷²

Conclusion

When Jesus finds himself alone at a well with a woman of Samaria, how will He respond? Will He treat her according to the norms of His culture? Will He view her as His disciples did, as almost everyone in her village did? Or will He view her according to the perspective of His Father? Will He perhaps use this as an opportunity to engage the culture in a redemptive way? Will He put aside his own reputation and look out for the interests of another?

It would seem that when Jesus found Himself in such a situation, He recognized the opportunity to reenact the biblical story found in Gen 16. At least, it would seem that the narrator of the story in John 4 intends his audience to hear the echoes of that OT story. As he constructs the story, its similarity to the narrative in the Hagar story seems too striking to be coincidental.⁷³ It would seem that the author constructed the story in such a way as to make those echoes obvious. Since this is an historical incident in the life of Jesus, the reader should also recognize the intention of the God-man in His actions in this story.

How will Jesus respond in this situation? He will mimic what He learned from the actions of His own Father (cf. John 5:18). In John 5:19, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” Later, He puts it this way, “Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the

⁷² Although such language would be anachronistic (since the founding of the church is still in the future at the time the events in John 4 take place), it is tempting to observe that this woman is the first church planter in this town of Samaria, similar in many ways to the work of Lydia, the seller of purple, in Philippi (Acts 16). Such an interpretation need not establish biblical support for women as church planters or church leaders today.

⁷³ I will grant that these similarities might be mere coincidences. It would, however, seem to take more faith (perhaps even of the blind variety) to read it that way than to observe these similarities as indications of authorial intention.

Father” (John 10:37-38).⁷⁴ It is not simply what He said that revealed His identity but His works as well (John 10:25). To His disciples, He said, “The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves” (John 14:10-11). It would seem that Jesus’ training in the Old Testament Scriptures gave Him the biblical ground for His behavior here.

Although He was a product of His culture, Jesus was also a student of it. He came to earth not as some de-contextualized, docetic, or Gnostic Christ, He came as a first century Jewish man, by which I mean “male” as well as “human.” He understood the culture in which He was raised. He knew where the boundaries were. He understood the cultural mores of His time. He knew how important it was to immerse Himself in that culture. He did not isolate or separate Himself from the culture. He knew how dangerous it could be to break society’s conventions. He regularly faced conflict; for example, when He broke the Sabbath traditions and when He associated with social outsiders like Gentiles, tax collectors, lepers, poor, prostitutes, and Samaritan women. He embraced that conflict, and at times even sought it out. He was not afraid to speak and act in a provocative way, yet He did so judiciously. He looked for ways to be redemptive in the culture. He had the wisdom to know when to submit to the cultural mores and when to rebel against them.

Jesus was a student of the Scriptures. He was so immersed in the biblical stories, and in the biblical story of redemption, that when He found himself at a well in a setting like in John 4, He re-enacted the story of Yahweh and Hagar in Genesis 16. In so doing, He provides a model of us. He provides us a model for how to read the Old Testament Christologically as well as an example of how His followers should engage the culture redemptively. Because He was in very nature God He humbled himself and considered others better than Himself. To His followers, the Apostle Paul says, “Your attitude [and actions] should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5).

⁷⁴ “Works” would seem to be more inclusive of all of His works, not just his miracles, as indicated by the NIV translation here as “miracles.”

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When his followers do that, they emulate the Father and the Son, empowered by the Spirit.



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