

**OPENING:**

The 95<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards air tonight, and every Oscars Season there is a discussion about representation and inclusion and about what our best and favorite movies say about our culture this year.

One of the means to do that is through something called the “Bechdel Test” and perhaps you have heard of it. The Bechdel Test is a set of three questions that can be applied to any particular movie. The questions ask:

- 1) Are there (in the movie) at least two women featured?
- 2) Do these women talk to each other?
- 3) (And, finally,) are they discussing something other than a man?

Historically, if you were to apply the Bechdel Test to the original *Star Wars*, it would not pass, but the movie *Aliens* does.

A look at Oscar nominees for Best Picture over the years found that only about ½ stood up to the test.<sup>1</sup>

Inevitably, someone recently applied this Bechdel Test to the entirety of the Bible and found that it indeed passed, that there are SIX scenes in the Bible where named women talk to one another... not about a man.<sup>2</sup>

**GOSPEL**

Our Gospel story does not pass because only one named woman is featured. The issues that it raises, however, around gender, sexuality, faith are so rich that, of course, it does not really matter.

There is A LOT in this passage, you might complain that the only thing that is as LONG as tonight's Oscars telecast is today's Gospel reading.

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<sup>1</sup> [Bechdel Test Movie List](#); [These Stats On Oscars' Best Picture Nominees Reveal Serious Gender Bias \(forbes.com\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> John Dyer (10/20/2020) “The Bible Passes the Bechdel Test. It Also Goes Beyond It.” *Christianity Today*  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/october-web-only/women-leadership-bible-pass-bechdel-test.html>

But it's so rich and powerful, one commentator said that the story itself is like a well, that you can keep sending your bucket down, and then get something a little bit different to drink every time, that you draw the bucket back up.<sup>3</sup>

Today, I'd like to indeed focus on the Woman at the Well, her characterization, her humanity, what we share with her as women and men, and how she helps us along the red carpet of our Lenten journey.

### **GENRE:**

The first thing to do is to decide what category, what genre, this story belongs in, what award it would be eligible to win.

Last week, we had a cool episode of *Nic at Night*, with Nicodemus encountering Jesus in the dark with learned and intellectual questioning.

Today we have a noonday rendezvous at a well that turns up the temperature in comparison. But this is no daytime soap opera fare, instead it belongs to a story form in Scripture with a rich legacy known as "well-betrothal stories." These happen all throughout the Bible, and they are (roughly) equivalent to our modern-day dramas where a man and woman might meet at a hotel bar, or on a blind date at a restaurant.

So, in the Old Testament,

Isaac met his wife at a well.

Jacob met his wife at a well,

Moses met his wife at a well. These are all "well-betrothal" stories.

This makes sense because wells, in Ancient Near East Culture, were one of the only places that women were allowed to go.... alone.

Overall, romantic love itself does not get much screentime in the Bible. There is the Song of Solomon, often read at weddings, and then there are these well stories. The only time that we hear an explicit expression of romantic love between two people is at a well, this specific vortex of intimacy, when in Genesis we hear that "Jacob loved Rachel."<sup>4</sup>

God, as screenwriter, for whatever reason, becomes matchmaker at the Well.

This love affair between creator and created, becomes particularly known in this

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Carter Florence "Homiletical Perspective" (John 4.4-42) in Bartlett, David Lyon and Barbara Brown Taylors, eds. 2015. *Feasting on the Word*. (Year A, Volume 2) Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 24, other scenes are Genesis 29, Exodus 2.

humble and sacred place.

At our most adventurous, we can consider the genre a Biblical “meet cute” where boy meets girl and sparks fly. But because this is Jesus, they fly in unpredictable, remarkable ways, that defy gender stereotypes and preconceptions.

In John’s Gospel, right before this passage, John the Baptist announces Jesus as the bridegroom coming into the world, baptizing with water. This flips the script, defies the genre, makes us pay attention.

Now I am not trying to go all *Da Vinci Code* on you. I am not saying that Jesus married or fell in love with the Woman at the Well, or Mary Magdalene or anyone.<sup>5</sup> But there is something special, something dynamic and climactic happening in this spot.

### **GENDER:**

Let’s get back to the cold data: the Bible has 3070 characters, only 202 of them are named women.

(By comparison the Koran only has one, Mary, and the Bhagavad Gita has none.)

A brief Scriptural run-down:

In the very first scene in the Bible, a woman, Eve, talks to someone who outranks the man, about something other than a man.

The future Jewish people are then entrusted to an aged couple, with Sarah as unlikely heroine

Next, you can hang your feminist credentials on what happens in the Book of Ruth. And: “You will never find a cruel word about Jesus in relation to women in the Bible.” The women are the first apostles, the witnesses to the Crucifixion. Paul entrusts his letter to the Romans to be carried by a woman. I could go on.

In between all that, now, the Bible can indeed be a brutal place for women, as the world is and has been. Passages that make you shudder and close your eyes, turn off the movie and close the book.

### **WOMAN at the WELL:**

All of that, all of that maelstrom of pain and hurt and the potential for love and connection, all are cinematically condensed and transported and edited down into this one place, Jacob’s well, and this one story, Jesus and the Samaritan Woman.

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<sup>5</sup> [The Sexual Subtext in Jesus' Encounter with the Samaritan Woman | Logos Made Flesh](#)

The latter, with her 5 husbands, has seen some of the worst that the world can offer women. Things are so bad that she perhaps only comes to the well at midday when no one else does, so the town does not talk. For her trouble, she meets this enigmatic man who does not seek to dominate or denigrate or diminish who she is. Instead, Jesus sees her, recognizes her, and engages her with complete honesty.

If only dating were this easy!

He breaks down her efforts to deflect, to talk about praying to this mountain or that, or to reduce things crudely to their respective ethnicities, or to a literal conversation about water. Her marital history is likewise dismissed, and never judged by Jesus, he just tells her the truth with all the toughness and tenderness that the scene demands.

Let's give her some credit: like the persistent widow with her mite, like the Syrophenician woman, like Martha and Mary, she hangs in there. She's not like the rich young ruler who bolts, not like Nicodemus who slinks away into the night. She can handle the heat, and she sticks in there. That's our Lenten lesson, midway through this church season, Easter might seem far off, the sun might be hot, the movie might seem to be running a little long, but hang in there.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Woman at the Well, in one sense, is a “nobody”—wrong gender, wrong tribe, wrong decisions, wrong everything. But Jesus treats her like a somebody. As someone deserving of a name, of deserving of respect. Then she goes out and earns it, converts the whole town, starts the Christian mission in this unlikely place.

The Church later, to its credit, will give her a name.

It's a good one—Photini- “Luminous One” or “Enlightened One”

She is said to have travelled across the Roman Empire as a Christian missionary. As stories go, hers has an ending worthy of Hollywood, legend has it that she ran crossways with the Emperor Nero, and she met her martyrdom in Carthage in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, thrown down, they say, into the bottom of a well to die.

NO doubt, in the dark, she reminded herself of her name, reminder herself of the Light of the World who overcame the darkness, the living water who brought salvation to the thirsty, and there at the bottom of the well she met Jesus again face to face...

**AMEN**