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"He whom thou have is not thine husband": A Sensus plenior approach to John 4:16-18

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Abstract

The image of a morally repugnant and socially outcast woman in the book of John 4:16-18 is widely held. The interpretations of scholars and theologians have focused on the manifestation of Christ's divinity through His supernatural revelation to the woman and also multiple dialogues and portrayals of the Woman in question. On the other hand, the identity of the unknown husbands has received little attention. This study employed the sensus plenior approach to analyze John 4:16-18 which involves the reflection on a text from the whole Scripture and making the entire Scripture a vital and central aspect in the hermeneutical process. The research refutes this widely held belief, demonstrating that the assumptions upon which it is built are less reliable than previously assumed. The study points to a historical precedent hidden in the narration, on which the contextual senses of ἀνήρ (husband) are based, requiring a re-reading of the text in a more nuanced and extended framework. This interpretation informs Bible interpreters and translators against relying on their initial presuppositions, which may over-influence a translation or interpretation in one direction, rather than taking the time to consider the best exegetical approach for reading a text.

Keywords: Husband, Sensus Plenior, Jew and Samaritan, John 4:16-18, Aner, Andras.

Introduction

Scholars of the New Testament have been captivated by the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, as told in John 4:1-42. To fully understand the encounter, which should never have taken place due to the long-standing animosity between Jews and Samaritans, one must delve into this history. While many interpretations of the passage have focused on the miraculous nature of Jesus' revelations, few have explored the significance of the Samaritan woman and her enigmatic husbands.

In John 4:16-18, Jesus instructed a woman to summon her spouse and join Him. The woman responded that she was not married. Jesus acknowledged her

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honesty and revealed that she had previously been married five times, and the man she was currently with was not her husband. While analysing John 4 and interpreting the identities of the enigmatic husbands, Morris posits that the Samaritan Woman was regarded as a societal outcast; a woman of ill repute residing on the outskirts of her community. Furthermore, Morris suggests that she had yet to fully comprehend her own needs, which may explain her frequent encounters with various men.[3] However, there was less clarity on the identity of these men and the marital saga that would have ensued between her and the husbands.

Tom Wright has also suggested that the woman's life has been filled with emotional turmoil, leading to several marriages that ended in divorce. He believes that it is impossible to determine if she was both a victim and perpetrator of sin.[4] Wright wonders about the emotional traumas she experienced that made it challenging for her to form lasting relationships. He posit that the traumas of losing her former husbands must have made it more difficult each time she settles with another. Despite her disorderly life, she has faith that Jesus is aware of her struggles.[5]

The Geneva Bible Note gave the account a more colouring view, it states how industriously the woman seeks to evade the conviction, and yet insensibly convicts herself and owns her fault. Matthew Henry notes states how closely Jesus brings home the conviction to her conscience (implying the woman's immoral state). Hence he presents a severe reproof of her present state of life: either she was never married at all, or the husbands had some other wife: so that, in short, *she lived in adultery.*[6]

However, it is worthy to note that Jesus never asked the woman to "go and sin no more" or preach repentance to her, which was one of the core traits of his ministries, rather the conversation drifted towards the controversy of where the original place of worship should be. (John 5:14, John 8:11) Traditionally, this statement has been interpreted as a straightforward reference to the woman's morally questionable history. However, a closer examination of the text suggests the potential for a deeper, more nuanced meaning, which can be uncovered through a sensus plenior approach. Applying a sensus plenior approach to John 4:16-18 is significant because it offers an opportunity to uncover potential layers of meaning regarding the nature of spiritual fidelity, worship, and relationship with God. The encounter with the Samaritan woman can be seen not merely as a confrontation of personal sin but as a revelation of spiritual truth that transcends historical, cultural and religious boundaries.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the "fuller sense" of John 4:16-18 by analysing the symbolic and theological dimensions of the passage. Specifically, it

[3] Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, Revised Edition. Edited by Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 214
[4] Tom Wright, *John for everyone: Part 1 chapters 1–10.* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002), 44
[5] Ibid, 45
[6] Matthew Henry Notes, *John 4-26*, (the Facsimile of the 1560 edition), (University of Wisconsin Press 1969)

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aims to investigate the implications of the phrase "He whom thou hast is not thine husband" within the broader biblical narrative of covenant, marriage, and divine relationship. In doing so, it will consider the spiritual and theological significance of marriage as a metaphor for divine-human relationships, drawing upon scriptural precedents and theological insights. By employing a sensus plenior approach, this study endeavours to offer a fresh perspective on the text, contributing to both biblical hermeneutics and Christian theology.

Methodology: Sensus plenior approach

The study employs the sensus plenior approach. The term sensus plenior, Latin for "fuller sense," refers to a deeper or more profound meaning intended by God but not necessarily fully understood by the human author of the biblical text. This concept is often explored within the context of biblical hermeneutics, where it suggests that a text may have more than its literal or immediate meaning. The term was first popularized by Catholic biblical scholars like Raymond E. Brown in the mid-20th century, who argued that Scripture could contain a divine message that transcends the immediate historical and grammatical context of the passage.[7] Additionally, this holistic approach may reveal layers of meaning that were not necessarily intended by the human author, yet are still part of the text's overall meaning and canonical context.[8]

Understanding the distinction between literal, allegorical, and sensus plenior interpretations is essential for a comprehensive grasp of biblical hermeneutics. A literal interpretation focuses on the direct meaning of the text based on its historical and grammatical context. An allegorical interpretation involves finding a symbolic or metaphorical meaning that aligns with broader theological or doctrinal themes, while a sensus plenior interpretation posits that the text carries a deeper, often hidden meaning that becomes clearer in the light of Christ or subsequent revelations.

Historic understanding of the Jews and Samaritans

The relationship between Jews and Samaritans dates back to the time of Abraham, as recorded in Genesis 12. In this chapter, God appeared to Abraham and called him; establishing a covenant between them. As part of this covenant, God promised to make a great nation from Abraham's descendants, despite the apparent impossibility of this. This promise was later fulfilled, as evidenced by the extensive genealogies and accounts of Abraham's descendants. Abraham had a son named Isaac, who went on to have two sons of his own, Esau and Jacob. Despite being the younger of the two, Jacob was chosen by God to inherit the covenant passed down from Abraham. God even gave Jacob a new name, Israel, and his 12 sons became the 12 tribes that would come to be known as Israel, God's chosen people.

[7]R. E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*. (USA: St. Mary's University Press, 1955).
[8] Douglas A Oss, Canon as Context: The Function of *Sensus Plenior* in Evangelical Hermeneutics, *Grace Theological Journal Vol.* 9, Issue 1 (1988) 107

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Before the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, they followed a theocratic regime where the ruler was considered divine, and judges served as leaders or overseers. Anderson analysed, the tribal structure remained relatively unstructured during the judges' tenure, and multiple crises ultimately led to the rise of the monarchy. Besides suggesting a lack of organization amongst the judges, Anderson's statement also implies that Israel faced numerous attacks from hostile neighbouring nations.[9]

Israel's first king was Saul. His kingdom was of a primitive type, in which the king acted more like a military commander than a monarch. Following Saul's rule, David and Solomon reigned. They were the only Israelite monarchs to govern over both the northern and southern kingdoms in what is known as a monarchy. David ruled over the twelve tribes for 33 years (2 Samuel 5:5). Solomon succeeded him as king, reigning for 40 years after being crowned while David was still alive (1 Kings 1:32-48). Solomon's kingdom lasted roughly 70 years before coming to an abrupt end following his death.[10] The reigns of David and Solomon as rulers of Israel have captivated Bible readers over the centuries. When compared to the era after that, when the country was controlled by its monarchs, the period when Israel had one king who reigned over all the tribes was brief.

According to 1 Kings 12 and 2 Chronicles 10, the division of the kingdom threatened in 1 Kings 11 took place at the start of Solomon's son's reign (Rehoboam). In an attempt to be anointed king by "all Israel," Rehoboam travelled to Shechem, but his plans did not work out. Rehoboam, however, was unwilling to comply with the demands made by a man named Jeroboam and the tribe elders because he would rather follow the advice of younger peers than that of more experienced and knowledgeable authorities.

Rehoboam was crowned as Solomon's successor in the sacred city of Shechem, which was the only one of its kind for the Ten Tribes. However, before the coronation, the assembly demanded that Solomon's policies be changed. These changes would have significantly limited the royal treasury and its ability to maintain the court's splendour. The main reason for this demand was the burden imposed on Israel due to Solomon's excessive spending on the temple and luxury items. Other factors also played a role, including the historical rivalry between the North and the South.[11]It's unclear if the older men recommended Rehoboam to accept the demands, but they did advise him to at least address the people politely. But when the new king asked the young men he grew up with for counsel, they told him to tax the populace even more and to show no signs of weakness. Regretfully, Rehoboam did as instructed.

[9] G.W. Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel*, (OUP, 1966), 50
[10] S Fischer, The Division of Israel's Monarchy and the Political Situation of Lesotho, *Verbum Et Ecclesia Jrg* Vol. 23, Issue 2, 2002, 353
[11]This is contained in the totality of S. Fischer article on the 15 reasons why Israel and Samaria split. S Fischer, The Division of Israel's Monarchy and the Political Situation of Lesotho, *Verbum Et Ecclesia Jrg* Vol. 23, Issue 2, 2002.

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Mario Liverani[12] claims that Jeroboam and the populace organized an uprising that caused the ten northern tribes to split off and establish their own empire. Known by several names, including Samaria, Ephraim, or the Northern monarchy, this new monarchy, which was made up of the ten breakaway tribes, was nevertheless referred to as the Kingdom of Israel. The remaining territory, which came to be known as the Kingdom of Judah, was given to Rehoboam. The Assyrians finally overran Samaria in 724 BCE, and the Assyrian monarch besieged both Samaria and the entire region for three arduous years. The Assyrian monarch was successful in taking Samaria and banishing Israel to Assyria during the ninth year of Hoshea's rule. The displaced people were then resettled in Halah, located by the [River] Habur, [alongside] the river Gozan, and [among] the cities of the Medes. (2 Kings 17:5-6)

With the population of Samaria and its vicinity deported, the region was settled anew and placed beneath an Assyrian governor. Already diminished in size, the kingdom of Israel was no longer a kingdom at all but rather an Assyrian province, denominated Samaria (Samarian) according to the city. After the fall of Samaria in 724 B.C.E., the Assyrian conquerors sent much of the population into exile to be resettled in various parts of the Assyrian empire. The king of Assyria brought pagans into Samaria to settle there (1 Kings 17:24). However, 1 Kings 17:30-31 tells us five groups settled there, each worshipping their pagan gods:

1. The Babylonians worshipped Marduk;
2. The men of Sepharvaim worshipped their city gods
3. The men of Cuth worshipped Nergal
4. The men of Avva worshipped Nibhaz and Tartak
5. King Hadad worshipped Anath.

Throughout the Old Testament chronology, we see the clear dichotomy between the two nations (Judah and Samaria). The Old Testament writers always differentiate between the kings, prophets and events that take place in the separate nations.

Exegesis of John 4:16-18

For (γάρ) you have had (ἔσχες) five (πέντε) husbands (ἄνδρας); and (καί) the man (ὃν) you now (νῦν)have (ἔχείς)is (ἐστίν)not (ουκ) your (σοῦ) husband (**ἀνήρ**): this (τοῦτο)said (ἐρέω) you truly (ἀληθής). (RSV)

The centre of this article revolves around the noun ἀνήρ. The lexeme "ἀνήρ" (anēr) occurs throughout a conversation that took place in verses 16–18 of John 4. ἀνήρ (anēr) is the concept of an adult; male, man; in contrast to a woman (Mark 6:44); as distinct from a boy *(adult) man* (1 Cor. 13:11); in a marital context, whenever *γυνή*(woman, wife) is present or implied in the passage

[12] Mario Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*. (United Kingdom: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2005), 56

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husband (1Cor. 7:3).[13] The use of a single lexeme for both 'man' and 'husband' is fairly common cross-linguistically in the New Testament, and the distinction is commonly resolved by a possessive marker "*σου*"

Viewing John 4:16-18 through the lens of Sensus Plenior

The concept of "husband" in biblical literature is often used metaphorically to represent God's covenant relationship with His people (Hos. 2:16; Isa. 54:5). In this sensus plenior reading, Jesus' reference to the woman's husbands could symbolize the Samaritan people's spiritual infidelity, as they were known to have adopted different forms of worship and mixed religious practices. The "five husbands" could represent the five foreign deities that the Samaritans had historically worshipped after being resettled by the Assyrians (2 Kings 17:29-41). Therefore, "the one whom you now have is not your husband" signifies the absence of a true spiritual relationship with the God of Israel, the "true Husband." According to Sim, this time the Samaritans gained their freedom of religion and thought that the causative factor to their captivity was their worship of foreign gods and thus returned to what she thought was her true religion, hence the sixth husband.[14]

In the sensus plenior framework, history of the Samaritan woman with multiple husbands can be viewed as a metaphor for searching for fulfilment in places other than God. The Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus represents an opportunity for alignment with divine purpose; a transition from fragmented worship practices to true worship that recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. By addressing the woman's marital status, Jesus is not condemning her but revealing the deeper thirst of the soul that only He can satisfy. This understanding aligns with the broader Johannine theme of Jesus as the Living Water, who quenches spiritual thirst (John 4:10, 14). The sensus plenior here highlights how the text conveys spiritual truths about seeking fulfilment outside of God's covenant, making it applicable to a wide audience and serving as a call to spiritual fidelity.

Evidently, the woman appears to realise that Jesus is referring to the Samaritan religion figuratively, and hence she raises the issue of worship. As a result, the debate shifts to where the appropriate place of worship (or the real type of worship) should be. It is worthy to note that before the division of Judea and Samaria, the Samaritans refused to acknowledge the Jerusalem temple as the legitimate venue for Yahweh worship. According to the Samarians, when Israel conquered Palestine, Joshua constructed the first tabernacle at Gerizim, and Gerizim remained the centre of all Israelite devotion until priest Eli established a competing sanctuary at Shiloh, resulting in two sanctuaries and two priesthoods. Eli's acts established the groundwork for this religious schism.

Fischer points out that the religious leaders' stance was weakened by their lack of unity. There was a rivalry between two priestly families. Abiathar was a

[13] Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical LexiconOf TheGreek New Testament*(Baker Grand Rapids: Baker's Greek New Testament Library, 2000)
[14] Ronnie Sim, The Samaritan Woman in John 4, *Journal of Translation*, Volume 11, Number 1 (2015), 1

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descendant of Eli. After the death of his father, Ahimelech, at Nob (1 Sam. 22:16-21, 30:7), Abiathar joined David. When David was crowned king of Judah, he appointed Abiathar as high priest and "king's companion" (1 Chr. 15:11; 1 Kings 2:26, 1 Chr. 27:34). Zadok, on the other hand, hailed from the family of Eleazar, a son of Aaron (1 Chr. 6:50-53, 2 Sam. 20:25; 1 King 4:4). His family had a lengthy genealogical history and was historically significant. David may have placed the clergy under the royal family's supervision due to this discord. Although Zadok was responsible for the ark, and Abiathar conducted offerings, David was the one who carried the ark into Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6, 2 Sam. 15:24-29). The temple was David's choice (2 Sam. 24:24). Solomon was the one who constructed the temple and dedicated it (1 Kings 6-8). The priestly appointments were inspired by David and Solomon; for example, David made his sons priests (2 Sam. 8:18).[15]

As a result, the Samaritans see Judaism as a continuation of Eli's heresy through Samuel, Saul, David, and the Judean Monarchy. They take pride in protecting the true old Israelite faith, which can be traced back to pre-monarchical Shechem practice and the Jews on the other hand, looked down upon the Samaritans and did not regard them as true Hebrew.[16] Therefore, the lady, who was a Samaritan, and Jesus, who was a Jew, had a debate over where they should worship. To give clarity and the core mission and person of Christ, Jesus said to the woman, “Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.” (4:21)

He further states that “you worship what you do not know, we worship what we know, for salvation is of the Jews.” In this instance, Jesus was not affirming whether the Jews were right in the place of worship or not but he was referring to himself; he is the road to salvation and he is a Jew, hence the statement that salvation is of the Jew. He, however, buttresses this argument in verse 23 when he says, “But the hour is coming and now is when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him” (4:23) Showing that one must not worship in Jerusalem or at Gerizim to be saved.

Decolonizing the use of “aner” (husband) in John 4:16-18

It should be noted that the concept of worship between man and God is loosely presented in the bible as a union between a husband and wife, with us being God’s bride (2 Cor. 11:2, Eph. 5:24, Col. 3:18). In the Old Testament, particularly in the prophetic books like Hosea and Isaiah, there are metaphorical descriptions of God's relationship with the people of Israel using the imagery of a husband and wife. This metaphor is used to illustrate the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Through the life and marriage of his prophet Hosea, God conveyed a poignant message to the people about their unfaithfulness. Israel's infidelity caused God to feel betrayed, much like Hosea did when his wife Gomer returned to a life of prostitution. In Hosea 1, his

[15] Fischer, The Division of Israel’s Monarchy and the Political Situation of Lesotho, 356 - 357
[16] Deji Ayegboyin, The Synoptics: Introductory notes on the gospel according to Matthew Mark and Luke (Ibadan: Greater Heights Publishers, 2008), 36

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marriage serves as a prophetic mirror, a vivid illustration of God's relationship with Israel. Just as Hosea is a faithful husband, God too remains steadfast. Meanwhile, Israel, akin to Gomer, is an adulterous wife.

In Isaiah, God is often depicted as a husband to Israel, and Israel as his bride. This imagery highlights the intimacy and commitment of the covenant relationship between God and his chosen people. However, it also serves as a rebuke when Israel strays from their covenant obligations. Overall, the metaphor of God as a husband in the Old Testament serves to convey the deep bond between God and his people, as well as the expectations and responsibilities that come with that relationship. Even before the arrival of Jesus Christ, God was already communicating with His beloved people through the symbolism of a broken marriage and relationship. Jesus became the embodiment of the bridegroom, a devoted spouse willing to sacrifice His life for the one He loved. Through His life, crucifixion, and resurrection, Christ restored our closeness with the Father and forgave our sins. Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 11:2, "For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." Because of Christ's atonement, we are presented to God with the purity of a virgin on her wedding day. Christ not only promised to remain faithful to the church, but also expressed His expectations for our relationship with Him as His bride.

In the book of Ephesians,Paul's words remind us to submit to one another in the fear of God. In particular, wives are expected to submit to their husbands in the same way that they would to the Lord. This lesson is applicable to the union of the church and Christ as well as the union of a husband and wife. Wives must submit to their husbands in every way, just as the church is subject to Christ. In contrast, husbands are expected to love their spouses in the same way that Christ loved the church. In order for the church to be sanctified and purified by the washing of water and the word and presented to him as a lovely and holy church without fault, Christ offered himself for the church. The Bible contains a prophecy about Jesus Christ and the church's ultimate reunion. At His Second Coming, Christ will unite with His wife in a joyous wedding ceremony that will unite them forever. The scripture states, "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his wife hath made herself ready And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints." (Rev. 19:7-8). Believers are encouraged to remain faithful and prepared until that wonderful day when they will join Jesus Christ and live together in perfect harmony as His beloved bride. (Matt. 25:1-13; Rev. 21:1-2).

In light of this, the term "husband," or ἀνήρ, may be used symbolically, particularly in the context of worship, as seen in the Samaritan religion. It is apparent that the woman in this passage recognizes the symbolic nature of Jesus' words and the implications for worship.

Theological implications of John 4:16-18 in contemporary Hermeneutics

The theological implications of John 4:16-18, when approached through a sensus plenior (a deeper, fuller meaning) lens, reveal profound insights into the nature of spiritual fidelity, worship, and the relationship between God and

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humanity. Here, the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman transcends its immediate narrative to address broader spiritual truths that are essential for Christian theology and practice.

A. The Call for True Worship: Spirit and Truth in John 4:23-24

One of the most significant theological implications of John 4:16-18 is its introduction to the concept of true worship, which Jesus elaborates on later in verses 23-24. By discussing the Samaritan woman's "husbands" and her current state, Jesus is not merely pointing out her personal history but is leading her to a deeper realization of her spiritual needs. The phrase "not thine husband" may symbolize the various false or incomplete spiritual "attachments" she has experienced, representing a deeper spiritual infidelity. This sets the stage for Jesus' revelation that "the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23, ESV). Here, "spirit and truth" imply a worship that transcends physical locations (Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem) and superficial religious practices, urging believers to seek a genuine, spiritual relationship with God.[17]

B. Understanding Spiritual Infidelity and the Pursuit of God

The notion of "husband" in biblical literature often symbolizes covenant relationships, not just marital but also divine. Throughout the Old Testament, God is portrayed as Israel's husband, and Israel's idolatry is often depicted as spiritual adultery (e.g., Hos. 2:2, Jer. 3:8). In this light, Jesus' statement, "the one you now have is not your husband" (John 4:18), may signify a critique of the woman's misplaced devotion, reflecting broader themes of Israel's infidelity to God. This interpretation emphasizes the importance of aligning oneself with God's covenant, rather than seeking fulfilment in worldly or incomplete spiritual unions.

C. Application to Contemporary Christian Life and Spirituality

From a theological perspective, the narrative invites contemporary readers to examine their own spiritual lives and the "husbands" or false attachments they may hold. In today's context, these "husbands" could represent various forms of idolatry, whether it be material wealth, social status, or even religious practices that lack sincerity. The call to worship in "spirit and truth" challenges believers to go beyond surface-level religiosity and enter into a deeper, more authentic relationship with God. As such, the passage can be seen as a critique of all forms of religious exclusivity, urging a move toward inclusive and sincere worship that transcends ethnic, cultural, or denominational barriers.

D. The Passage as a Challenge to Religious Exclusivity and Division

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman also holds significant implications for understanding religious exclusivity and division. Samaritans and Jews had deep-seated historical and theological differences, yet Jesus intentionally breaks through these barriers to engage with her. By doing so, He demonstrates that access to God is not limited to a particular ethnic group or sacred location, but is available to all who seek Him in truth and sincerity. This

[17]A. J. Kostenberger, *John* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament). (Baker Academic, 2004)., 45

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reflects the inclusive nature of the Gospel and reinforces the idea that God's grace is not confined to specific traditions or customs.

Conclusion

The reading of this popular story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is seen as an example of how Jesus dealt pastorally with the woman in leading her to conversion. It is also viewed as an example of sensitive, gentle, pastoral ministry. It points out that Jesus did not violate her selfhood in leading her to understand. Although the story has been perceived as a model for Jesus' followers in succeeding generations on how to employ their activity of personal evangelism, a diverse hermeneutical approach (sensus plenior) is exploited, thus presenting a new framework to the entire encounter. It thus shows that the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is centred on the theme of worship, which is generated through historical antecedents. In a clear tone, the approach summed up the five different husbands (gods), whom the Samaritans have married (worshipped); Marduk, Nergal, Nibhaz and Tartak, Sepharvaim city gods and Anath, additionally, it indicates that the current husband (god or a form of worship practised) is not Israel's legitimate husband (the true God). Thus, Jesus offers her (the church) a true form of worship that rests neither in Jerusalem nor Mount Garizim but a practice where the worshippers of the true God will worship him in truth and spirit.

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