

VINDICATING *the* VIXENS

REVISITING SEXUALIZED,

VILIFIED, AND MARGINALIZED

WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

SANDRA GLAHN
E D I T O R

 Kregel
Academic

Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible

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To those who seek to act justly.

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?*

*To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*

—Micah 6:8, NIV

*Profits from this book benefit the work
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THE “WOMAN AT THE WELL”: WAS THE SAMARITAN WOMAN REALLY AN ADULTERESS?

LYNN COHICK, PHD¹

Florence came to my house twice a week, selling vegetables. She carried on her back a bag weighing nearly forty pounds. With its strap across her forehead and the load on her back, she hunched along dirt roads about two hours each way to the cluster of houses where my husband and I lived in Kijabe, Kenya. There, my husband helped start a children’s hospital, where he served as executive director, and I taught at the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology.

One day, as Florence rested with me on my porch, we began to chat about her life. She told me her husband had died when her children were young. It was important that she remarry, she said, so her children could have a father figure. Her parents sought a suitable spouse, and the man they chose was her grandfather’s age. Florence smiled, confessing that at first she disliked the idea. But then she saw the wisdom of their choice. I later met him, a wonderful, wizened man—mostly blind and deaf, but dignified. Florence cared for her elderly husband, and the marriage gave her stability and self-respect.

As I listened to her, I began to think about the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4–42). I saw parallels immediately, even as I recognized the distinct qualities of each culture. Florence’s experience with marriage seemed unusual to me, but her culture approached marriage in ways similar to the ancient world.

1. This article first appeared in *Christianity Today*, October 12, 2015.

While in Kenya, I also learned that some couples didn’t have a wedding, but simply “set up house” together. They called each other husband and wife, had children together, and were seen by their community as married. They had no money for a wedding ceremony and no government certificate establishing their relationship in a legal sense. To my Western and evangelical Christian sensibilities, they were cohabitating. But in their culture, they were married.

With these new perspectives, I took a closer look at the Samaritan woman. I researched the life settings of first-century women and discovered details about ancient marriage customs that illuminated her situation. My research—along with that of a small but growing number of other scholars—led me to suspect that the Samaritan woman has been misunderstood.

MARRIAGE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Most people in the ancient world got married—women often in their teens, men in their late twenties. Given the high death rate, people were often widowed and then remarried, perhaps two or three times. The Greeks and Romans did not practice polygamy, but evidence shows that some Jews entered bigamous marriages. The only legal document for marriage was a dowry document listing the property and wealth that the bride brought to the marriage. The husband could use this money however he wanted, and any profit he made was his to keep. Should they divorce, however, he must return the entire dowry—but if his wife was found guilty of adultery, he could keep the dowry. Couples could live together as husband and wife without a dowry contract, or even a wedding. By setting up house together, they signaled to their community that they considered themselves married.

Divorce was an option; it was typically not shameful, unless it resulted from adultery. Women could not initiate a divorce, but they could ask a male advocate to do so and thus regain the dowry. It is difficult to determine how common divorce was, but the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 19:9–11 tells us divorce wasn’t unheard of. Even Joseph considered it when he learned that Mary was pregnant (Matt. 1:18–19).

The culture in which Jesus taught was indeed diverse and complicated. To understand his conversation with the Samaritan woman, we must examine it within its first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman context.

PROBABLY NOT AN ADULTERESS

John 4 tells us that Jesus left Judea because his ministry was heavily scrutinized. Returning to Galilee, he decided to travel through Samaria rather than take a longer route around the territory. Jews usually took the long route to avoid interacting with Samaritans, whose false religious views they opposed.

After walking all morning, Jesus and his disciples arrived at Sychar, the place of Jacob’s Well. Jesus stayed behind while his disciples went to town to get food. What followed was a one-on-one encounter between Jesus and a religious seeker, as is frequent in the Gospel of John.

Jesus is thirsty, and a woman comes along with a bucket. Some scholars suggest she was a prostitute looking for customers. They argue that morally upright women drew water in the morning when it was cooler, not at midday.

It certainly would have been more efficient to get water earlier, but this value did not govern all ancient societies—nor does it today. In the village near my home in Kenya, for example, women washed and dried clothes in the hot equatorial sun. It would be more efficient to wash clothes early in the day, so that by evening the dry clothes could be folded and brought inside the house. But my Western assumptions were challenged when I saw women begin their washing at mid-afternoon, then hang the clothes to dry overnight and into the next afternoon—hardly efficient, but perhaps more conducive to their food preparation and fellowship with neighbors.

Notice John doesn't say why the woman was at the well at noon. Perhaps she was helping a neighbor with young children. Or maybe she needed more water to finish her tasks. John tells us the time of day to explain why Jesus would be hot and tired, not to comment on when virtuous women drew water.

We might wonder why the woman appeared to be alone (although John doesn't explicitly say she was alone). Most people traveled in groups, for daily chores and life's burdens are more bearable when singing and sharing with friends. But in itself, the detail that she was alone doesn't speak to her character. It is a detail later in the story—that the man she is with now is not her husband—that seems to cast a shadow of shame on her.

When the woman agrees with Jesus that she has had five husbands and the one she is with now is not her husband, it sounds like she is confessing sexual immorality. It sounds like she has treated marriage flippantly in the past, and is now cohabitating. But our assumption clashes with the other details John gives. He presents her as an inquisitive religious seeker who is trusted—perhaps even admired—by her fellow townspeople.

So if she wasn't sexually promiscuous, what could explain her history and current situation? It's unlikely that she was divorced five times, each time for committing adultery. No man would dare marry a convicted adulteress with neither fortune nor fame. That she was a serial divorcée is also unlikely. She would have needed the repeated help of a male advocate to do so. Further, we have no evidence that anyone in the ancient world, man or woman, divorced five times. The closest parallel is the first-century-BC general Pompey the Great, who married five times; he was divorced twice and widowed twice.

And since barrenness was not always a cause for divorce, we cannot assume she was divorced for that reason. Think of the long, childless marriage of Elizabeth and Zechariah, who were blessed late in life with a son, John the Baptist. Yet if she was known to be barren, can you imagine five men risking marriage to a woman everyone knew was infertile? Not in their culture.

It is more likely that her five marriages and current arrangement were the result of unfortunate events that took the lives of several of her husbands.

Perhaps one or two of them divorced her, or maybe she initiated divorce in one case. As for her current situation, maybe she had no dowry and thus no formal marriage, meaning her status was similar to a concubine’s. Perhaps the man she was currently with was old and needed care, but his children didn’t want to share their inheritance with her, so he gave her no dowry document. Perhaps he was already married, making her his second wife. While the ancient Jewish culture allowed it, such an arrangement went against Jesus’s definition of marriage as a union between one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4–6). It makes sense, then, that Jesus would say she wasn’t married. Scripture doesn’t tell us why she had five husbands, but exploring first-century realities helps us imagine how her life might have unfolded.

LONGING FOR TRUTH

Five clues in the text support the view that John’s Gospel does not condemn her as an immoral sinner, but highlights her as a seeker of truth.

First, while losing spouses was a tragic reality, being a widow or divorcée five times was unheard of. This means Jesus could not have guessed her situation; it was clear that his knowledge of her was divine.

Second, her response reminds us of Nathanael (John 1:43–49). As Nathanael approached Jesus, Jesus said to him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” (v. 47). Stunned, Nathanael asks why Jesus would say such a thing. Jesus replies that he saw Nathanael under a fig tree just moments beforehand. Jesus knew Nathanael’s earnest desire to serve God, thus demonstrating Jesus’s prophetic, messianic character.

Jesus could not say to the Samaritan woman that she served God well, because she, a Samaritan, held erroneous religious beliefs. But he could speak about her identity. Like most women, her identity was tied to her father, husband, or son. By knowing her history and current situation, Jesus signaled to her that he knew her. And, like Nathanael, she was astounded at Jesus’s power.

Third, John presents her—along with other women, such as Martha (11:21–27)—as theologically astute or inquisitive.

Fourth, Jesus does not label her as a sinful woman. He doesn’t say to “go and leave your life of sin,” as he enjoined the adulterous woman in John 8:11. Instead, he talks with her about deep theological truths, including the claim that God must be worshipped “in the Spirit and in truth” (4:24). Those who say she is licentious often argue that she tries to divert Jesus’s attention from her past by asking an unrelated religious question. But would Jesus really be dissuaded from pursuing his case? That happens nowhere in the Gospels. Why wouldn’t she have religious questions? She probably had a hard life, and perhaps, like Naomi in the book of Ruth, wondered, Where is God? Here is a man who might have answers, so she asks him questions that have puzzled her.

Finally, the fact that the townspeople listen to her testimony suggests that she was not a shunned sinner. They believe Jesus is the Messiah not because of

the disciples' preaching, nor because she allegedly changed her ways, for that would take time to validate. Rather, they believe because of her testimony. They probably knew she had religious questions and was not easily swayed by every preacher passing through. She was, therefore, a credible witness.

Jesus knows the longing of our hearts, as we see in his desire to engage the Samaritan woman's questions.

For most early church and medieval interpreters, the Samaritan woman was a careful, polite seeker—a sinner who, once illumined, truthfully witnessed her new faith to others. But in the Reformation, she became a symbol of promiscuity. Whereas the church fathers believed Jesus was revealing himself to her, says historian Craig Farmer, the Reformers suggested that Jesus was revealing herself to her to get her to see her sin and repent.

Florence helped me see marriage in a new way. She shared with me her dreams, disappointments, and joy in the Lord. Her situation encouraged me to research more deeply and to see the Samaritan woman as three-dimensional. I now see her as one who probably endured more than the typical number of tragedies, yet never stopped seeking God. She was not an outcast or sexually immoral—according to the social codes of her village. And she embraced Jesus's message with such joy that her town believed.

All this has enhanced my gratitude for Christ's amazing love. Though tired and thirsty, he looked to the needs of another. He made clear that the Samaritan woman sinned in rejecting the one true God. And he showed her that God's love extended to her personally. He knows the longing of our hearts, as we see in his desire to engage the Samaritan woman's questions.

Moreover, Jesus guides us to answers for which we had no questions. The gospel is far more encompassing than either the Samaritan woman or Jesus's disciples realized. Jesus challenges social prejudices, and brings visibility and voice to the invisible and silent in society. In giving a voice to the Samaritan woman, John encourages us to tell others about our encounters with the Savior. And may those who hear our story, by God's grace, respond like the townspeople, believing because of our testimony.

“Finally a book that recognizes misunderstood biblical women as Kingdom builders rather than home-wreckers. What a joy to know teachers have a resource for exhorting their congregations to be like Peter and Paul, and also like Tamar and Rahab. As each chapter vindicates another woman, God’s love for the marginalized and oppressed jumps off the pages reminding us that he welcomes men and women to pick up the hammer and get to work in the *Missio Dei*.”

—**Nika Spaulding**,
Resident Theologian,
St Jude Oak Cliff

“*Vindicating the Vixens* is a monumentally important work in that it confronts the prevalent misinterpretations of some of the most critical women in Scripture. The faithful and meticulous research of Dr. Glahn and the contributing authors advances the powerful message of the book—God’s passion for the marginalized, the misunderstood, and the outsider. This book will challenge the way you look at women, both those in the Bible and those you meet every day.”

—**Paul Lanum**,
Vice President of Publishing,
RightNow Media

“One of the most important tasks of the believer is to practice faithful exegesis of Scripture—to allow the text to speak for itself without inserting personal or cultural bias. Through the centuries, many women of the Bible have been unfairly labeled, and thus, inaccurately taught. Drawing from faithful study, insight, and experience, the authors expose the errors passed down through the generations and bring to light this beautiful truth: The God of the Bible highly esteems and works through women. Let the vixens be vindicated and the word of God celebrated! I am so grateful for this book.”

—**Rebecca Carrell**,
Conference Speaker, Bible Teacher,
KCBI Morning Show Co-Host

“The biblical narrative provides an accurate description of gender. All human beings bear the imago Dei and enjoy the same God-given value and dignity. The fall distorted the relationship of humanity with God regardless of one’s gender. The salvation and restoration that Christ brings to humanity makes no distinction between male or female and, in fact, destroys all human-made gender marginalization. For this reason, it becomes imperative to handle faithfully the biblical text in order to have an appropriate understanding of gender, sexuality, and marginalization. Sandra Glahn selected an important group of contributors who together portray a faithful description of key women in the Bible. This exceptional and relevant text fills an unfortunate gap created by distorted, traditional perspectives and not from the Scriptures.”

—**Octavio Javier Esqueda**,
Professor of Christian Higher Education,
Talbot School of Theology at Biola University

“I always love the stories of God’s daughters in the Bible—God’s storybook of the relentless love and pursuit of His people. I especially love when the fuller stories open our eyes to surprising realities. In *Vindicating the Vixens*, Sandra Glahn has pulled together a treasure trove of those stories, written with careful theology, cultural comprehension, and captivating narrative. I can name a few of my favorites—Eve, Ruth, Deborah, Mary Magdalene—but truly, I loved getting to know every one of these too-often maligned sisters better. And so will you, I’m sure.”

—**Judy Douglass**,
Writer, Speaker, Encourager, Director of Women’s Resources,
Office of the President, Cru

“*Vindicating the Vixens* is a course correction for the Church—and an invaluable one at that. Chapter after chapter it redeems the reputation of many of the biblical women we’ve often misunderstood. In the process, it removes misunderstandings, misplaced convictions, and unintentional bias and in their place leaves a better sense of God’s love and justice. Reassessing my forgone conclusions has never felt so valuable.”

—**Kelsey Hency**,
Editor in Chief,
Fathom