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The Samaritans, who only acknowledge the Pentateuch as inspired, were looking for Moses' successor, the giver of water. It's the woman at the well who first puts the pieces together and recognizes the long-awaited Restorer.

BY DR. JIM SIBLEY

What's the difference between physical thirst and spiritual thirst? It has been said that spiritual thirst operates on almost exactly the opposite principle than physical thirst. For example, when a man is physically thirsty, if he is not given something to drink, his thirst only increases until he eventually dies. But if he is given something to drink, his thirst is satiated. Spiritual thirst is different. When this thirst is neglected, it diminishes, but when spiritual "water" is given, the thirst for more only increases. In John 4, we read of a Samaritan woman who learned who she was, and she learned who Jesus was. In the process, she discovered a thirst she didn't even know she had.

First, we need to know who the Samaritans were. They were Israelites; they were not Gentiles. [1] An ancient hatred and hostility existed between the northern and southern tribes that goes back to the time of the Judges, though the break between the two came with the foolishness of Rehoboam (1 Kngs 12). This hostility was religious and cultural in nature. The Israelite kings had been idolatrous and established alternatives to the temple in Jerusalem. These Israelites, now called Samaritans, did not accept any Scriptures except their own version of the Pentateuch. So, the Samaritans were Israelites, though they were apostate in their faith. They were viewed as unclean by the Judean Jews. There were three barriers between this woman and Jesus: She was a Samaritan; she was a woman; and she carried a burden of shame and guilt.



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The woman at the well identified Jesus as the Prophet like Moses. How do we know? First, because of the way she answered Him. She said, "You are a prophet" (v. 19). Literally it reads, "Prophet you are." By answering in this way, it is likely that she was proclaiming Jesus to be "the prophet." Even though the definite article, "the," is not found in the Greek text, there is a principle of Greek grammar which states that with this grammatical construction, the definite article may be assumed. [2]

How did she connect the dots? She identified Jesus as the anticipated Prophet (v. 19), but why? There were two primary reasons for this recognition: their discussion regarding "water" (vv. 7-15) and Jesus' supernatural knowledge of her private life (vv. 16-18).

Moses gave water to the people of Israel in the wilderness [3], and, significantly, the place where the water was given is called Mattanah in Numbers 21:18, which means "gift." In John 4:10, Jesus told the woman, "If you knew the gift [Heb., mattanah] of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." With this, Jesus presents himself to this Samaritan woman as the Prophet like Moses. [4]

When Jesus revealed her marital and moral failures, she learned who he was. Certainly, it was possible for a prophet, such as Elijah, to possess knowledge supernaturally; [5] however, in Samaritan tradition, "if one shows supernatural knowledge, that one must be the Taheb." [6] The Taheb, or Restorer, in Samaritan thought was the Prophet-like-Moses. [7] Even more significant is the fact that they did not accept the books of the Prophets or the Writings. They were only looking for the prophet prophesied in Deuteronomy 18.

On a day, long ago, a woman learned who she was: a very thirsty Samaritan. She had discovered a thirst she didn't even know she had. She also learned who Jesus was—the Prophet like Moses, who could provide living water in her personal wilderness.

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Footnotes

1. See Jacob Jervell, "The Lost Sheep of the House of Israel: The Understanding of the Samaritans in Luke-Acts," in *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1972), 113-132. See also, Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 672.
2. This is referred to as Colwell's Rule. See Raymond E. Bown, *The Gospel According to John 1-12*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 171.
3. Exod 15, 17; Num 20, 21.
4. Sukmin Cho, *Jesus as Prophet in the Fourth Gospel*, New Testament Monographs 15 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 175.
5. For example, see 2 Kngs 5:25-27.
6. Cho, 179.
7. See, for example, Shomron, "The Taheb, the Restorer, A Prophet like Moses," available from http://members.tripod.com/~osher_2/html_articles/taheb1.htm, Internet. Also, Benyamin Tsedaka, *Understanding the Israelite-Samaritans, From Ancient to Modern* (Jerusalem: Carta Jerusalem, 2017), 14.