Five Husbands:

Slut-Shaming the Samaritan Woman[1]

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Abstract

This essay pushes back against the many readings, both scholarly and popular, of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) as an example of Jesus' "radical inclusivity." It argues that receptions of the passage as inclusive often perpetuate the tendency known as slut-shaming, a tactic frequently employed to denigrate women and police their sexualities. Slut-shaming techniques are common both in biblical commentaries and in popular readings of John 4, and, I argue, are also employed by the author of John. Slut-shaming is the attempted denigration of a person, usually a woman or girl, because of her perceived sexual deviancy or promiscuity. Viewed through this lens, it becomes evident that the passage is hardly a call for inclusion of women or Samaritans. In the end, the character of the Samaritan at the well becomes just another woman for men to "think with." While finding inclusive readings of scripture is an important part of an ethical interpretive framework for religious communities, readings of this passage as an inclusive text run the risk of participating in the same slut-shaming that occurs in the biblical text. What is more, the pattern of slut-shaming in scholarship on John 4 reinforces damaging norms within the academy, norms which enable a culture of sexism and rape culture to flourish within our guild.

Key Words

Samaritan Woman, Gospel of John, Slut-shaming, Feminist criticism, gendered violence

> *Colonel Mustard: How many husbands have you had?*
> *Mrs. White: Mine, or other women's?*
> *Colonel Mustard: Yours.*
> *Mrs. White: Five.*
> *Colonel Mustard: FIVE?*
> *Mrs. White: Yes, just the five. Husbands should be like Kleenex: soft, strong, and disposable.*[2]

In John 4, Jesus famously encounters a Samaritan woman with whom he carries on a lengthy repartee while his disciples have gone food-shopping. Because he

[1] A special thank you to Elizabeth Castelli who provided me with access to articles and chapters that were not available to me due to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which this essay was written. I would also like to express my gratitude to Michelle Fletcher who helped me think through the relationship between *femmes fatales* and slut-shaming.
[2] Jonathan Lynn, *Clue,* 1985.

dialogues at length with a woman in general, and a Samaritan in particular, who challenges him on several points and is knowledgeable about inner-Jewish boundary debates and theological questions, the account is often held up as an example of Jesus's magnanimous inclusivity, especially (and problematically) over and against other Jews.[3] It is only when he miraculously reveals that he knows her entire sexual history that he gets the upper hand in the discussion and she in turn becomes an "apostle to the Samaritans." Like the popular notion that Jesus "even" deigned to dine with so-called sinners like tax collectors and sex workers, here the Samaritan woman's Otherness—in terms of her gender, her Samaritan identity, and, most importantly of her sexual history—is exploited in order to portray Jesus as generous and benevolent.

This essay investigates the many levels at which the Samaritan woman has been slut-shamed, contributing to the prevalence of rape culture in biblical interpretation. I will demonstrate how past readings of Jesus and the Samaritan woman tend to gloss over how slut-shaming occurs in the text, and how they even reinforce the slut-shaming performed by Jesus in their own comments on John 4, or try to apologise for the woman's sexual history by providing alternate, socially-acceptable justification for the number of her partners. After contextualizing the Samaritan woman's sexuality through the lenses of slut-shaming and the *femme fatale*, I conclude by connecting scholarly approaches to the Samaritan woman's promiscuity to issues of rape culture and sexism in the field of biblical studies as a discipline.

Readings of the Text as Inclusive[4]

There exists the prevalent view that Jesus's benevolence is proven through just how magnanimously he consorts with sinners. Jesus's forgiving nature is often evidenced by claiming that he "hung out" or dined with sex workers, especially but not exclusively in the popular imagination.[5]

[3] See Alexandre (1992, 418-420) for a particularly clear example of this dynamic in scholarship.
[4] Portions of this section were originally drafted and appear in a slightly different form in Parks, Sheinfeld, and Warren (2022, 171-172).
[5] For a critique of the concept of the inclusive Jesus, see Bockmuehl 2011; Bockmuehl does not address Jesus's inclusivity vis a vis women; however, he does point out the danger of the so-called inclusive Jesus for Christian Judeophobia. Jennifer Wright Knust (2017, 402-431) makes a related observation about feminist biblical interpretations of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11).

However, the biblical texts do not include such a gathering. Instead, Jesus does not look favourably on women's sexual activity,[6] paid or otherwise. By way of context for examining the account involving the Samaritan woman, it is important to interrogate this particular perception of Jesus as friend of women. Notably, there is no description of Jesus ever dining or socialising with sex workers; instead, in Matt 21:28-32, the Parable of the Two Sons, Jesus uses tax collectors (τελῶναι) and what the NRSV translates as prostitutes (πόρναι) to insult the elders and chief priests. Nowhere do any of the Gospels describe Jesus encountering a πόρνη, although he does encounter tax collectors and more generic sinners (ἁμαρτωλοί) elsewhere (Matt 9:10, 10:3, 11:19; Mark 2:15-16; Luke 3:12, 5:27, 29-30, 7:34, 15:1). It's likely that the original idiom was indeed τελῶναι καὶ πόρναι because of the phrase's origins in the Q source, which tends to favour gendered pairs, in this case tax collectors (male profession with negative social connotations) and sex worker (female profession with negative social connotations) (Parks 2019, 94-96). In Luke 7:37, a text often assumed to reference Jesus dining with a sex worker, the woman is described only as being a sinner and from the city; her sin is just as generic as (or perhaps even more generic than) those sinners associated with tax collectors in Matthew's text.[7] Jesus' reputation is much rosier than his narrated behaviour warrants. Regardless, in every case, the phrase is used as a hyperbolic insult designed to denigrate Jesus's opponents; it is not a rallying cry to inclusivity. As with other

[6] Or men's, for that matter.
[7] καὶ ἰδοὺ γυνὴ ἥτις ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἁμαρτωλός. The *Women's Bible Commentary* identifies her as a prostitute due to Luke's description of her being from the city (Schaberg and Ringe 2014). Kathleen Corley argues that the woman's identification as "from the city" would be enough to mark her as a "streetwalker" (Corley 1993, 124), but I do not find this argument convincing. Corley cites Osborne (1987), who looked at this combination of woman/sinner/city in Jewish literature in partial support of this conclusion, however as this was a conference paper, I am unable to engage with Osborne's argument.

examples of this kind of comparison, the tax collectors and sinners are being used *to think with*.[8] They exemplify how poorly "this generation" is abiding by Torah; they stand as hyperbolic examples of just how low the bar is. Jesus in these examples is not arguing for inclusion but rather using women, sinners, and tax collectors to shame his real interlocutors.

But likewise, there is the problem of using this popular assumption to elevate Jesus's reputation irrespective of whether it reflects the gospel accounts or historical record; this claim, that Jesus dined with sex workers, is intended to juxtapose two contrasting individuals: on the one hand, Jesus, son of God, forgiver of sins, all around swell dude; on the other hand, this line of thinking goes, a woman whose profession is a sin so damning that she should be used emphatically to indicate the true boundlessness of Jesus's forgiveness. For example, Monique Alexandre's treatment of early Christian women includes the claims that the Gospels represent a "marked change" from the position of women in early Judaism (Alexandre 1992, 419);[9] the "traditional hierarchy was overturned" by Jesus's involvement with women, she writes, linking this claim to Matt 21:31 and John 4 in almost the same breath (Alexandre 1992, 420). Luise Schottroff argues that Jesus's compassion in John 4 actually liberates a woman who is "suffering to be freed from her prison" (Schottroff 1992, 121).[10] In other words, the prevailing, seemingly progressive or even feminist, eagerness to wave a giant foam finger at Jesus's feminism—often linked to the perception that he hung out with imaginary sex workers (a quick Twitter search yields numerous popular examples of this view)—actually does nothing to recognise the autonomy, humanity, or acceptability of sex work itself, and instead only further emphasizes the gulf between perceived sexual sin and righteous forgiveness. I wholeheartedly agree with the rallying cries raised by scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others that we need an ethics of biblical interpretation that preferences inclusivity and justice (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 195-197). Previous Christian-liberationist and Christian-feminist readings aimed to create space for women within the church, but an ethics that privileges Christian women is hardly inclusive (Parks 2019, 58-59). Likewise, inclusivity fails if it is at the expense of sex workers, Jews, and others used by the text to propagate a rhetorically powerful argument for following Jesus. In effect, such a mode of understanding Jesus could be understood to participate in the phenomenon called slut-shaming.

[8] Claude Levi-Strauss coined the phrase "good to think with" in 1962. With regard to women as tools for men to think with, Peter Brown appears to have originated that usage (Brown 1988).

[9] This position, as in this example, is often (inadvertently?) connected with a pernicious anti-Judaism, in which Jesus's engagement with women is also dangerously presented *in contrast* to his Jewish contemporaries. See discussion in Parks (2019, 4).

[10] Translation mine, from: "Er hat sich nicht dadurch also Prophet oder Messias erwiesen, dass er wunderbares Wissen über verborgene Untaten hat, wie fast durchweg in der Auslegung dieses Texts behauptet wird, sondern dass er einer Unterdrückten und Leidenden zur Befreiung aus ihrem Gefängnis hilft."

This approach also occurs in scholarship on the Samaritan woman; she is used as an example of Jesus's radical inclusivity precisely because of her perceived sexual indiscretions. For example, Paul Anderson in his *Christology of the Fourth Gospel* writes that "In general, the treatment of women in John is more elevated than in Matthew. This is illustrated by the fact that the Samaritan woman becomes a follower of Jesus and even an 'apostle to the Samaritans' (Jn. 4:7-42)" (Anderson 1996, 236). Jerome H. Neyrey describes the encounter in this way: "she represents the quintessential deviant (non-Jew, unclean, shameless, even sinner); but in her transformation, she exemplifies the radical inclusivity of Jesus' circle" (Neyrey 2003, 118). As in the example of the tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes in the synoptic gospels, the Samaritan woman is used to shame Jesus's true interlocutors, and not as a symbol of inclusion for all. She is juxtaposed to the clueless disciples – *even* an adulterous Samaritan woman, the lowest of the low, understands more than they.

Slut-Shaming

Slut-shaming is a cultural phenomenon that is as contemporary as it is long-lived; it is a pervasive feature of both recent and ancient times. Slut-shaming is a means of restricting women's sexual activity by using a woman's sexual history, reputation, or activity to discredit her (Sweeney 2017, 1578). It is a form of sexual slander (Drake 2019, 593; Knust 2006, 3, 116) especially aimed at promiscuity, hence the colloquial use of the term "slut" to denote (in particular) a woman who has multiple sexual partners. Slut-shaming as a social tool is used to mark its subject as "deserving disrespect" (Sweeney 2017, 1579). It is "a societal process that is predominantly directed at women, where individuals are publicly exposed and shamed for their 'perceived sexual availability, behaviour or history'" (Webb 2015; Gong and Hoffman 2012, 580; Tanenbaum 2015). As a phenomenon, slut-shaming connects the perceived promiscuity or sexual deviance with shame. Shame is intimate, deeply connected with the self (the person experiencing shame) but it is also relational, in that shame is a public emotion. Shame serves to alienate – it isolates the victim from community: "Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (Brown 2007). Shame is a powerful emotion, and in slut-shaming it is weaponised.

Slut-shaming can happen to flesh-and-blood individuals and literary figures alike; if literary, it can happen within the text itself or crop up in later receptions. It almost always happens to women rather than men or male characters due to patriarchal expectations that men should be fully actualised human beings whereas women (and their sexuality) should be presided over by men. Women outside these norms are considered dangerous. Recognising slut-shaming in biblical accounts and in scholarly assessments of biblical texts is important because it reveals the scaffolding supporting systemic sexism in biblical texts as well as in the guild. Slut-shaming in antiquity might be tempting to wave away with a claim of "it was

different back then," but in reading John 4 more closely there are suggestions that we need not understand Jesus's reaction to the woman's history as automatic or necessary. However, I will suggest in this article that it is not just the author of John's gospel who passes judgement on the Samaritan woman's sexual past; scholars do as well. It is more difficult to wave away a history of scholarship that amplifies Jesus's disdain for her and which attempts to interpret that disdain as acceptance instead. What is more, that scholarship reflects a profound issue at the heart of our discipline: slut-shaming is but one part of systemic rape culture in the guild.

Five Husbands?! Slut-Shaming the Samaritan Woman

This is the context in which to examine the interaction between Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan woman. The tendency outlined above to read Jesus as inclusive, as seen in academic and popular treatments of the Samaritan woman, is one of the ways that she is slut-shamed. The significance of Jesus's rudeness to her, and his sexualising of her in the midst of a conversation, has been problematically overlooked, so that scholars often (inadvertently) replicate his slut-shaming of her. Thus, there are two parallel incidents of slut-shaming connected to the Samaritan woman. One occurs at the level of narrative, where Jesus reveals the woman's history as a tactic to convince her of his identity through his knowledge of her life. This event is constructed by the author who intends the interaction to have an effect on the implied audience.

The second example of the phenomenon operates within scholarly discussion of the biblical scene and has two ways of manifesting: either by expanding on Jesus's slut-shaming (the commentator takes on the role of Jesus) or by reimagining the woman's sexual history as virtuous, or acceptable within the normative sexual roles for women (the commentator takes on the role of rescuer). In other words, in conjunction with the tendency to use the Samaritan woman to showcase Jesus's radical inclusivity, there are two ways to slut-shame: one emphasizes the frowned-upon sexual activity as a negative, while the other attempts to downplay non-normative sexual-activity in an attempt to defend the character from accusations of sluttiness. Both of these approaches understand sluttiness to be bad. At each level, the slut-shaming takes place in public, as is implied in the phenomenon of slut-shaming: the conversation between the woman and Jesus is at the well, a public space; it is reported in a gospel, to be read in community; it is commented on by scholars with the expectation (however naive) that their work might be widely read.

In the first category, some scholars read in further details about the woman's sexuality.[11] Brown's commentary describes the woman as "mincing and coy"

[11] Luise Schottroff reports some appalling commentary by German scholars of the mid-Twentieth century, including Bultmann, remarking that "Die Warnung vor dem Verhalten der 'schlechten Frau' dient der Disziplinierung der Frauen und ihrer Anpassung an das herrschende Frauenbild (1992, 116).

(Brown 1966, 175), but acknowledges her role in bringing about what he calls the "conversion" of the Samaritan peasants (Brown 1966, 184). Generally, she is acknowledged as being an important witness to the spread of the news of Jesus, often mentioned in the same breath as Nicodemus.[12] But unlike Nicodemus, she remains unnamed. Instead, she is marked by her foreignness, that she is Samaritan (O'Day 1992, 295; Moore 2003, 81). The Samaritan woman's foreignness—that she is known only by her ethnic identity and not given a name, as Nicodemus is—aligns with her perceived adultery.[13] Indeed, sexual shaming is connected to the sexual depravity associated with "foreigners" in antiquity (Drake 2019, 593), as evidenced by the pervasiveness of the association between idolatry and adultery in the Bible, from the prophets to Revelation's Babylon. The fact that, as a Samaritan, the woman shares a God and a portion of her scripture with Jesus does not exempt her from judgement, either of adultery or idolatry,[14] and indeed her foreignness makes her sexual deviancy all the more likely in the minds of ancient authors and readers.

It is widely accepted that the encounter with the Samaritan woman is modelled after so-called betrothal scenes that are prevalent in the Hebrew Bible.[15] The expectation of a betrothal at the end of the scene is subverted, however, when Jesus enquires about her marital status, and we discover that she is not the virginal daughter of Jesus's relation but rather a woman who has already been married several times. This information is revealed not through the woman's own admission but because of Jesus's telepathic ability to "tell her everything she had ever done" (John 4:17-19, 39). This feat is part of how John reveals Jesus's true identity (Larsen 2008, 134).

Raymond Brown's Anchor Bible commentary on the passage indicates that Jews could marry three times; in that context, the Samaritan woman's five marriages and (at least) six relationships might seem excessive, or as Brown phrases it, "markedly immoral" (Brown 1966, 171). Brown is far from the only commenter to remark unfavourably on the woman's relationship status; she has also been called a "five-time loser" (Duke 1985, 102) and a woman who has led an "immoral life, which has exhibited profligacy and unbridled passions for a long time" (Zahn 1921, 244).[16] More neutrally, couching his discussion in the gendered social norms that

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[12] The Samaritan woman and Nicodemus may be a Johannine "gender pair" (Beirne 2003, 67-104; Conway 2003).

[13] It is worth noting the close association between terms for adultery and sex work in antiquity (Adams 1983; McCoy 2006).

[14] Some commenters on the scene suggest an allegorical reading of the five husbands as the five books of the Samaritan Torah (Origen, *In Jo.* 13.8; GCS 10:232), or instead as the gods worshipped by the people of Samaria according to 2 Kings 17:29-34 (Brown 1966, 17; Moore 2003, 82; Knust 2019, 531).

[15] Culley (1976) originally pointed out the recurring motif of the Betrothal Scene at the Well. On its re-use in John, see Brant 1996; Larsen 2008, 124-125.

[16] See also discussion of German scholarship in Schottroff 1992. Moore (1993, 211) provides these references to Zahn (1921, 244) and Duke (1985, 102) and, in n.18, also lists a number of other shockingly negative sexualizing statements made by scholars about the Samaritan woman's life.

worked as cultural currency in antiquity, Neyrey observes that, even if she were a widow (offering Mark 12:20-23 for comparison), "her current non-marital relationship…suggests either adultery or concubinage" (2003, 110), which he states would be a mark of shame in a world in which women's sexual exclusivity was a sign of her honour.

Neyrey's comment highlights the important dynamic of the economy of honour and shame in antiquity. This so-called honour/shame dichotomy lends itself to analysing how slut-shaming functions in the conversation as well as how it is perpetuated in scholarship. Neyrey is correct that sexual promiscuity and participation in non-normative sexual encounters was honour-removing for women and for the men to whom those women belonged. As such, slut-shaming was a common tactic in antiquity (Webb 2015). In a Jewish context, we need look no further than Josephus when he reports on the women of the Herodian court, or in a later Christian context, the slut-shaming of Theodora by Procopius in *The Secret History*. In both cases, slut-shaming is used by authors to denigrate the women in question for political gain (Betancourt 2020, 59-88). A narrative of repentance, where a woman comes to her senses and gives up her lascivious past, only reinforces that the previous slutty behaviour is shameful.

There are also scholars who see the woman's promiscuity as extending to her interactions with Jesus himself. Eslinger, for example, sees the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman as rife with sexual double entendres (Eslinger 1987). For example, Eslinger notes that "drinking water from a well" could connect to the warning against promiscuity in Prov 5:15-18, and that the phrase "living water," aside from its use for flowing water elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, is used with sexual undertones in Jer 2:13, since the text uses the phrase to point to Israel's infidelity to her husband Yahweh (Eslinger 1987, 170; Brant 1996, 214).[17] The woman herself initiates this flirtation, according to Eslinger, since she is the one who first uses a double-entendre when she, pointing out that Jesus is a man and she a woman, reminds him that Samaritans and Jews do not συγχρῶνται (v 9)—which, with the dative, can mean to have sexual intercourse (Eslinger 1987, 176). The desire depicted by the evangelist does not only belong to the Samaritan woman. While interpreters focus on the woman's seemingly insatiable desire for husbands, Jesus's desire is crucial for understanding the scene: Jesus desires that the woman desire the water he is offering (Moore 2003). Scholars who focus on the woman's desire, either in her current or past relationships or her current interactions with Jesus, desexualise Jesus in order to remove any hint of sexual shame lingering about him, shame that might rub off the woman and contaminate Jesus.

In this context, and with the betrothal type-scene lurking in the background, Eslinger argues that the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is flirtatious, and the woman's response to Jesus's offer of the living water reflects her

[17] Likewise, in Song of Songs 4:12, the metaphor of a cistern of water is employed in a sexual context.

understanding that he is making advances; Eslinger calls her comeback "provocative" and her use of double entendre here lascivious, since she alludes to the "well" of Jacob, who "watered so many" (Eslinger 1987, 177). For the reader, who knows what Jesus means because of the previous three chapters of John's Gospel, Jesus's response is not as innuendo-laden as it might be to the Samaritan woman, who, Eslinger suggests, might have been encouraged by Jesus's claim that she will thirst no more after being satisfied with the flowing fountain of his living waters. Enough to satisfy even a woman with five previous husbands. Wink, wink. When Jesus directs her to go and get her husband, then, he does so with the intention of putting a stop to this flirtation: "Had she not been making sexual advances, had Jesus not understood them, and had the reader not understood both the woman and Jesus, his command to go call her husband would make no sense here. Jesus tells her to go get her husband exactly when she expected to commit adultery against the man" (Eslinger 1987, 178). Eslinger describes the woman as embarrassed by what she might consider Jesus's change in tone and reads her subsequent responses as attempts to "maintain her respectability" (Eslinger 1987, 179). In this reading, Jesus plays along with the woman's advances long enough to cause her embarrassment, and then showcases her promiscuity by revealing her marital status and adulterous behaviour, twice over. Jesus does not appear compassionate or even forgiving, but Eslinger's argument puts Jesus in the playful position of violating gendered social customs as a participant in this sexualized repartee. Jo-Ann Brant observes that the conversation with the Samaritan woman rounds out Jesus's character, but its result, if we are expecting one thing based on the trope of the betrothal at the well, is comedy because of her previous husbands. Brant acknowledges that Jesus's response is not sympathetic or necessarily accepting of the woman's status, from a narrative perspective, because the comedy resides in the rejection of the woman because of her sexual history (1996). The key points here are the sexual nature of the banter and that Jesus's aim is to cause embarrassment: The slut-shaming is present in the text itself. This is not an inclusive Jesus when it comes to sexuality.

The second category of slut-shaming is more subtle. Feminist commentators have hastened to point out the woman's role as dialogue partner. This move is an attempt to rehabilitate the Samaritan woman by showing how she and Jesus are equal partners (or even that she is his superior) in this debate about the Living Water (Moore 2003, 85). Mary Rose D'Angelo avers that "the text imputes neither sin nor shame to the woman" since Jesus does not require the woman's repentance (cf. John 5:14) (D'Angelo 1999, 134). Regarding her previous marriages, scholars such as Gail O'Day remind us that the text nowhere says that she was divorced; the woman may simply be an unfortunate widow or trapped within regulations around Levirate marriage (O'Day 2012, 521-522). This, however, does not do away with the issue of the Samaritan woman's current relationship, and the widow reading removes some of the rhetorical effect of the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Jesus's request that the woman go and bring her husband to him reads as pretty

heartless in this scenario; her husbands are dead, and perhaps, as a widow four times over, she was reluctant (perhaps like Sarah in Tobit?) to go through the formalities this time around. But what this explanation also attempts to do is wipe away any hint of stain on the woman for these previous marriages and her current illicit relationship. Schottroff details the socio-historical context in which chain marriages such as the Samaritan woman's might have occurred, and notes that in her report to her community, she does not view herself as a victim of that situation, having been liberated by her conversation with Jesus, in which, Schottroff claims, Jesus does not appear judgemental about her sexual past (1992, 121). Attempting to rehabilitate the Samaritan woman reinforce normative feminine sexuality as confined within the bounds of heterosexual marriage and participate in the shaming of alternative relationships implied by the Samaritan woman's history. In other words, providing "safe" or virtuous explanations for the number of husbands in the Samaritan woman's past reinforces the binary of slut and virtuous woman.[18] As Sweeney observes, this tendency may be an unconscious defensive mechanism (especially given the systemic rape culture in the discipline of biblical studies) "in which some women distance themselves from other women in efforts to protect their own social standing and to secure preferential treatment from those in power" (2021, 1580). In both attempting to rescue the Samaritan woman from accusations of sexual impropriety and in attempting to uphold her as a model of Jesus's radical inclusivity, scholars align themselves with Jesus in his scorn for the woman's current marital status. They likewise include themselves in what they identify as Jesus's model inclusivity when they praise her eventual acceptance of Jesus as a messiah.

A Shameless Woman

One way of understanding the precise mechanism of slut-shaming in John 4 and its interpretation is through the lens of the *femme fatale*. If scholarship which participates in slut-shaming is as ineffective at enforcing sexual norms on the Samaritan woman as that which seeks to rehabilitate her, the Samaritan woman becomes dangerous. As Caroline Blyth describes her, the *femme fatale* is "the terrifying woman whose malignant eroticism has the power to intoxicate her victims and drag them mercilessly towards destruction or even death" (Blyth 2017, 9). Her characteristics are her heightened sexuality and her dangerous allure to those (men) she encounters. The threat of the *femme fatale* works alongside the rubric of slut-shaming because it implies that there is something wrong with women who seek their own sexual pleasure rather than existing only to please men; namely, they are dangerous. Though the construct of a *femme fatale* is not equivalent to slut-shaming, I believe the

[18] Moreover, even if the Samaritan woman is an equal conversation partner with Jesus in this scene, the fact remains that Jesus uses her "shameful" unmarried situation as a rhetorical weapon to disarm her and persuade her of his identity.

trope engages with a form of slut-shaming by attaching women's sexual independence to death and danger for male sexual integrity. A woman who refuses to be shamed is potentially fatal.

The Samaritan woman's response to Jesus's question about her marital status illustrates her refusal to be shamed – her shamelessness. "Shamelessness … engages self-humiliation, transforming it into a poignant, even defiant, acceptance of human finitude and vulnerability" (Burrus 2008, 3). She "leans in" to Jesus's attempt to humiliate her, responding plainly about her current and past relationships. I can almost imagine her exhaustion at having to field such questions (*again?*); I can almost hear the disappointment in her voice when what she thought was an intellectual conversation among equal sparring partners dissolves into yet another evaluation of her personal life. Perhaps these disappointments are familiar to some of my readers, as well. But her shamelessness, her unapologetic response to Jesus's invasive question, gives her a certain power. Perhaps reminiscent of Sarah in Tobit, the Samaritan woman's marriages can be read as dangerous—and potentially even fatal—for her partners. We are given no clues about how the marriages ended. Most scholars assume divorce, the insatiable Samaritan woman flitting from one relationship to another. As mentioned just above, feminist interpretations, attempting to excuse just how many husbands the Samaritan woman has had, posit that she is a widow many times over (O'Day 2012, 521; Schottroff 1992). Although less slutty in this reading, her potential liaison with Jesus is more deadly by a factor of five. As well, the Samaritan woman's foreignness contributes to her danger as *femme fatale* (Stott 1992, 37-8; Blyth 2017, 16). Her sexual allure as she encounters Jesus, and the way he pulls back from the banter at just that moment, indicate that the thrill of speaking with her is not just about her gender or her foreignness as Samaritan. Especially when the choice is between ordinary mortal "water" and the water of life offered by Jesus, the concept of death lingers near the couple as they debate.

The Samaritan woman's characterisation as *femme fatale* is not limited to the biblical text's depiction of her but lurks under the surface of many commentaries on the text. While the concept of a *femme fatale* was not a named idea at the time John was writing his gospel, the idea that women were dangerous, sexual beings whose uncontrolled activity could lead to men's downfall was certainly prevalent; one only need look at the reception history of Eve for an example (see Parks 2022). It has certainly impacted biblical scholarship's engagement with John 4. Though scholars do not mention the phrase, the titillation and gleeful horror with which commentators have described her sexual history clearly mark her as one. Blyth notes that the *femme fatale* is a figment of our imagination, not a historical person, but this makes her no less real. Rather, she reflects her creator's ideas about gender and society: "the fatal woman often functions as an 'anxiety pointer' – a scapegoat upon which the insecurities and preoccupations currently threatening dominant social discourses are projected" (Blyth 2017, 21). In attempting to heighten the sexual

elements of the Samaritan woman's erotic past on the one hand, and to dampen them by rehabilitating her sexuality into widowhood, scholarship shares this anxiety about how the woman disrupts these "dominant social discourses" with her shamelessness. Fears of women's liberation and independence from men and the heteronormative family unit contributed to the artistic proliferation of the fatal woman. Whether in the context of the Augustan moral reforms or the most recent reaction against feminism in the form of the alt-right movements and their trickle-down effects, women's sexuality is often at the heart of social angst, in scholarship as well as in culture more broadly.

Concluding Thoughts

Scholarship's preoccupation with pointing out (or trying to sweep under the rug) the Samaritan woman's sexual past is a reaction against her shamelessness. She threatens to undo our popular assumptions about Jesus, the "self-denying and solitary knight" (Blyth 2017, 15): his single-ness, his celibacy, his open-armed acceptance of all types of people, his divinity. Jesus fits the shameless slut's target victim profile in his ascetic rejection of the pleasures of the world, and yet is able to emerge victorious from this battle; in pointing out the woman's status, he resists her power. The slut-shaming she endures in scholarship is indicative of biblical scholars' overarching discomfort, not necessarily at what her sexuality might mean for Jesus, who skilfully resists her seeming advances; rather, slut-shaming serves to justify Jesus's rudeness to her, and thus to maintain his reputation as a Good Guy faced with such a deadly seductress.

What seems to be missing in the discussion of John 4 is any consideration of the woman's experience in her own community. Commentators are so focused on Jesus's mingling with a scandalous woman, pointing out how tolerant, norm-bending, or flirtatious he might be, without noticing that the woman herself might have a very different experience among her neighbours. Neyrey's discussion in *The Feminist Companion to the Gospel of John* focuses on the general gender norms for ancient Greek and Roman society, including ancient Judea (Neyrey 2003). He points out the numerous places in texts by Roman and Greek authors, including Philo, that articulate how and where a woman should participate in society, and the honour-shame currency to which women's sexuality is tied. There are two key verses in John 4 which are under-appreciated in my view: John 4:28-29. In those two verses, the woman goes back to the city and speaks to her community.[19] Later,

[19] Neyrey (2003, 111) says that the woman goes back to the public space, the marketplace, to speak only with "males" (sic) rather than the private spaces of the city to speak with "females" (sic) but the text nowhere infers the gender of the Samaritans the woman speaks with or the gender of those who respond. John 4:28 reads: "ἀφῆκεν οὖν τὴν ὑδρίαν αὐτῆς ἡ γυνὴ καὶ ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὴν πόλιν καὶ λέγει τοῖς **ἀνθρώποις·** δεῦτε ἴδετε ἄνθρωπον ὃς εἶπέν μοι πάντα ὅσα ἐποίησα, μήτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστός;" *Anthropos* is an unmarked word for person, though grammatically masculine, and can refer to, in the plural, mixed-gender groups. The *LSJ* also notes that the term can be used to refer to a

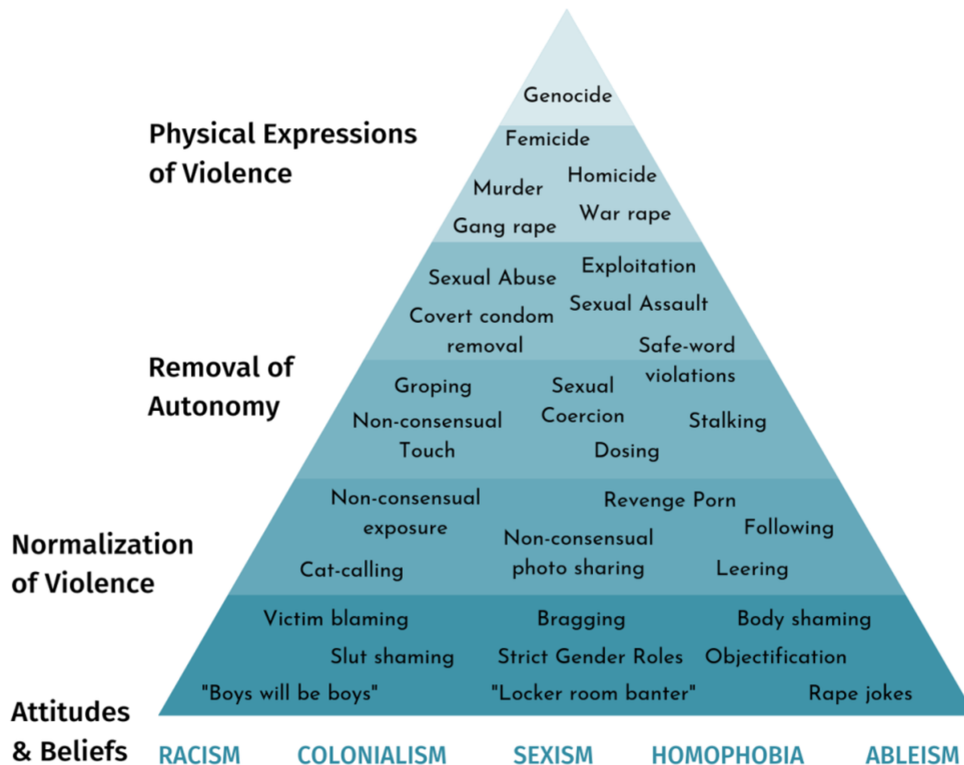
in John 4:39-40 we learn that "many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony," specifically that Jesus had known about her previous husbands and her current partner; but the fact that the woman's testimony is believed *in her own community*, where presumably her domestic life would be widely known, suggests that scholars assume too much about Jesus's own response to the woman. In other words, the Samaritans in the story seem largely unbothered by the woman's life, at least unbothered enough for the woman to feel empowered to speak freely to her community about her encounter, and unbothered enough to take her seriously. Jesus's interaction with the woman is rendered less remarkable when we decentre him and recentre the Samaritan woman; indeed, his behaviour is comparably much less radical and less kind than that of the Samaritan community in which the woman lives.

Recognising Jesus as contributing to the slut-shaming of this woman through his rudeness has an illuminating effect on several aspects of scholarship and on the guild. First, it highlights one ramification of attempts to uplift Jesus as wholly inclusive or wholly tolerant, despite ambiguous and conflicting evidence. That consideration involves the false claim, rarely made by scholars but frequently repeated in popular discourse and by our students, that Jesus and the New Testament God are loving and kind, in opposition to the Old Testament God (somehow a distinct entity), who is (according to this view) intolerant, hateful, and violent (See Mroczek 2021). It would be easy to juxtapose the idea of a tolerant, sex-worker friendly Jesus with the horrific account of the concubine in Judges 19, for example. I hope that by unpacking scholarly discomfort with the Samaritan woman's sexual history and her present activity, and identifying slut-shaming rhetoric in many commentaries, this will provide support for those of us who wish to push back against the false dichotomy of a loving New Testament and vengeful Old Testament idea of God, which is both a result and a cause of anti-Judaism. In fact, gender-based violence is prevalent throughout ancient Jewish, early Christian, and Hellenistic/Roman texts, including those that came to be Scripture. This is not something to elide by coming up with excuses for the woman's multiple marriages (maybe she was simply a very unlucky widow!). Rather, as uncomfortable as it might be, it is important to challenge the reputational public relations force that has for centuries been the lens through which Jesus's interactions with women have been viewed. There are real ramifications for upholding this view of Jesus, and one of them is the perpetuation of rape culture.

I began this essay with a quotation from the film *Clue*. The quotation is from Mrs White, a seductive character with red lipstick played by Madeline Kahn. Mrs White's previous husbands have all died under mysterious circumstances. When a female character (or a real-life woman) is depicted as being both attractive and dangerous (particularly from the perspective of heterosexual men), she, like the

woman or single-gender groups of women.

Samaritan woman, is a *femme fatale*, unashamed (and even proud!) of her sexual past. The scholarly reproduction of the slut-shaming narrative around the Samaritan woman and the discomfort with her husbands has ramifications for women in the field as well. As Blyth notes, the depiction of women as *femme fatale* "reinforces and



sustains dominant cultural ideologies about women's marginal placement in the world and the inherent dangers of their agency and empowerment" (Blyth 2017, 180). This view illuminates how many academic readings of her are slut-shaming. As illustrated by this diagram from the University of Alberta's Sexual Assault Centre, slut-shaming is on the spectrum of sexual violence in that it supports a system of rape culture. When women in control of their own sexual and marital choices and pleasures are seen as shameful, then gendered violence that befalls them is depicted as a consequence of their own moral failure, or even as "deserved." Rape culture is not merely hypothetical; it culminates in more physical forms of violence including rape and murder; what begins as "attitudes and beliefs" at the bottom of the pyramid, quickly escalates to the "normalization of violence," "removal of

autonomy," and "physical expressions of violence." The Samaritan woman's story fits so smoothly within the existing rape culture of the discipline that it has not even been noticed that she is so shamed.

The Samaritan woman's treatment in a good portion of academic work written about her cannot but have an effect on the construction and reinforcing of cultural norms within the academy, and in particular, for women scholars within biblical studies. Rape culture is inescapable, and biblical studies is no exception (See Stefaniw 2020; Stiebert 2020; Poletti 2020; Nakhai 2018). Sexual harassment is rampant in our field.[20] The example of Helmut Koester's harassment and assault of Elaine Pagels (Pagels 2018; Reiss 2018), among his other women graduate students at the time, is but one recognisable name among a sea of much more ordinary incidents of rape culture. A survey on harassment conducted by the LGBTQ+ Task Force of the Society of Biblical Literature in early 2020 found that 5% of members have experienced or witnessed inappropriate behaviour at SBL meetings (LGBTQ+ Taskforce 2020). There was no data collected about the gender of those responding, but if the demographics of the respondents reflects the membership, then it's possible that that 5% is mostly women and trans members; this means that up to 15-20% of women (likely higher among trans respondents) experienced and/or witnessed such behaviour. Speaking about Jan Joosten's conviction in 2020 for child pornography, Esther Hamori wrote on Twitter that this is "what it looks like when systems prioritize the perspective and reputation of men" (Hamori 2020; Young 2020). Hamori's comment leads me to consider what systems of analysis we use that "prioritize the perspective and reputation" of Jesus, and how insidious rape culture is in our lives and scholarship.

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[20] And as the 2019 Membership Report for the Society of Biblical Literature states, "Members identifying as women continue to represent about 25% of the membership." https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/sblMemberProfile2019.pdf 2019 is the most recent year for which data is published at the time of publication. For a discussion about gender representation in one field of biblical studies, see Rollens 2020.

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