Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well
John 4:1-42
A Performance-Critical Analysis

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1. Method & Original Context of Oral Performance

The following essay offers a performance-critical analysis of a particular narrative, John 4:1-42, preserved as silent text in the Bible. We assume that this text was originally told or read aloud, and that moving listeners emotionally was at least one possible purpose in first-century oral performance.¹ Four types of clues assist us in recovering the way the Fourth Evangelist may have sounded this story for his intended listeners: 1) what we can surmise about the identity of the implied audience; 2) the cultural background of prominent details from the perspective of the implied audience; 3) the plot of this particular story; and 4) the content of the utterances of narrator and characters in the context of the cultural background and developing plot.

The cultural setting of the story and the cultural location of the intended listening audience are most the fundamental denominators in this narrative. It begins with a private conversation between a Judean male and a Samaritan female by a public well. The first-century cultural background of such an encounter is, first of all,² intense hostility between Judeans and Samaritans. The relationship between those religious siblings vacillated over the centuries. During the first century C.E. they were at a decidedly low point. Samaritans had a short time after the birth of Jesus profaned the Temple, scattering human bones in the porticoes and throughout the Temple! The Judean historian Flavius Josephus, who was born shortly after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection and a contemporary of the Fourth Evangelist, reports an incident that took place sometime between the years 6-9 C.E.:

During the administration of Judaea by Coponius . . . an event occurred which I shall now describe. When the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which we call Passover, was going on, the priests were accustomed to throw open the gates of the temple after midnight. This time, when the gates were first opened, some Samaritans, who had secretly entered Jerusalem, began to scatter human bones in the porticoes and through the temple.³

² The male-female issue is of equal importance. We take it up in Section 2 below.
With that hostility as background, we must ask the question, With what feelings might the Evangelist have described the setting and rendered the words of the Judean Jesus and the Samaritan woman to each other, and then of Jesus’ Judean disciples upon discovering the two in conversation?

Before we offer a possible answer to that question, let us enrich our picture of the cultural background by asking the question, To whom might the Evangelist have been telling this story originally, as one episode in the context of his Gospel, of course? How might the anticipated responses of the intended audience have colored the way the Evangelist set the scene and rendered the words of the characters?

The significantly if not exclusively Jewish provenance of the Fourth Gospel is widely recognized. Although the conceptual and linguistic world of the Evangelist is surely no more of exclusively Jewish than that of any other Jews living in a Hellenistic environment in which many streams of tradition and creative thought and practice were interacting with and helping to shape each other, what is to be noted is that the development of the Gospel narrative leading up to this conversation between Jesus and the woman assumes an audience who knows the Jewish traditions and who will likely respond from the perspective of Jewish norms.\textsuperscript{4} The hymnic opening alludes to Jewish traditions about Wisdom,\textsuperscript{5} as well as to the opening of Genesis. The first testimony is given by John the Baptist, pictured as a popular prophet who draws the attention of various Jewish religious leaders, and who in reference to the Jewish sacrificial system calls Jesus the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” John’s Jewish followers and other Jewish men are successively drawn to Jesus, seeing in him the promised messiah and the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote. By performing

\textsuperscript{4} C. K. Barrett, \textit{The Gospel of John and Judaism}. Fortress, 1970, argues that we can decide between whether the goal of the Gospel was to strengthen the faith of Christians or to win non-Christians on the grounds that Jn 20:30f show that he was laying out “the full significance of an already existing Christian faith.” (17) “Jesus is the Christ, and that in the sense that he is the Son of God,” that is, not merely adopted into the divine family as in the usual messianology, but possessing a metaphysical relationship with God and therefore the full power of God to save. (16-17) We would agree that in trying to convince Jews that Jesus is the Messiah, he does wish to initiate them into a Christian faith that has broken new ground, first in response to the newness of Jesus and then under the influence of the rich environment of Hellenism. But Barrett overlooks the rhetorical strategy of the narrative development and does not recognize that it is Jews who have not yet believed that the Gospel seeks to bring into the fullness of this faith.

\textsuperscript{5} Proverbs 8:22-31; Ben Sirach 24:1-12; 1 Enoch 42. In \textit{Questions on Genesis}, Philo of Alexandria, a Jew, speaks of the logos as the “second God” in whose likeness the human being was made. In \textit{On Dreams} 1.227-229 Philo distinguishes between the presence and the absence of the definite article before “God” as a way of distinguishing “Him who is truly God” from “him who is so called by analogy.” Sources cited and quoted in John J. Collins, \textit{Encounters with Biblical Theology}. Fortress, 2005, 185.
“signs,” Jesus acts in the tradition of Moses. Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple of commerce fulfils Jewish scripture, Psalm 69:9. A Pharisee, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, exhibits the openness of at least some Jewish leaders. If the listeners are not in fact Jewish, they must quickly try to take in the Fourth Evangelist’s Jewish perspective. They must try to put themselves into the Gospel narrative’s thoroughly Jewish world and make their way around in it. They must try to hear the story as Jews.

This may sound like an odd thing to say about those listening to the Fourth Gospel. First of all, for a very long time it has been widely assumed that the break between Christianity and Judaism became institutionalized very early in Christian history, that the Fourth Gospel manifests this break. Consequently it has been difficult to imagine how a Jew who was not already a believer would have been willing to listen to a narrative like the Fourth Gospel in which “the Jews” are so often Jesus’ opponents and at one people even said to be “of your father the devil” (8:44). All this has come to be newly open to serious question. A new wave of research offers strong evidence that Christians and Jews mingled quite freely at least until the fourth century. For example, Paula Fredriksen argues that contra Iudaeos statements by church leaders, instead of being evidence for a clean break, testify to the continuing mixing which those leaders are seeking to end! If Christians and Jews continued to mix with each other, it is quite plausible that Jews who were not already believers were at least open to the appeal of Christians like the Fourth Evangelist to embrace Jesus as Messiah, and that the Gospel is designed to be heard by Jews in order to bring them to belief on the basis of Jewish traditions and norms. The effect of the Fourth Gospel is not, after all, to alienate listeners from Judaism, despite the fact that in the Gospel the term Ioudaioi is often (though not always) used for those who reject Jesus, and in spite of the fact that the majority of people today, both Jews and Christians, assume that Judaism and faith in Jesus were mutually exclusive already in the Fourth Evangelist’s time. Throughout the Gospel the Evangelist musters Jewish traditions and testimonies in support of Jesus’ claim to be Messiah. The Fourth Evangelist’s narrative, of course, includes the theme of fear of the community authorities and exclusion of believers from the synagogue. But could this not reflect a move on the part of synagogue leaders to draw lines the populace was not drawing, similarly to the way Christian leaders were trying to draw firm lines from their side with their contra Iudaeos statements? After all, the Evangelist’s narrative pictures

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6 See the many passages in the LXX of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy where sameion is used of the miracles performed by Moses. E.g. Ex 4:8, 9, 17, 28, 30; 7:3.
7 Tom Boomershine first observed the way these opening four chapters are saturated with appeals to Jewish traditions and norms in a conversation in the early 1970’s.
the people split in their response to Jesus, not two communities separated from each other. Jesus moves about freely among the people and draws the interest and approval of many!

Wayne Meeks argues that the symbolic world together with the literary devices in the Fourth Gospel constitute insider language that no one not already in the sect would be able to understand.\(^{11}\) We propose that, if told aloud to Jewish listeners who lived in a community where \textit{Christianismo} had not yet become disembedded from \textit{Ioudaismo},\(^{12}\) the strangeness of the language could be precisely the thing that would intrigue a not-yet-believing Jewish listener. Told or read aloud in an engaging way, the Fourth Gospel is a powerful narrative, quite capable of holding a listeners attention. The appeal for faith on the basis of Jesus’ often novel resonance with many Jewish traditions and norms would engage a Jewish listener’s interest immediately by the combination of its familiarity and the strangeness of application to Jesus. If sufficiently hooked on the story, the repeated use of double entendre and misunderstanding and pervasive ironies would give the uninitiated listener sufficient opportunity to get on board with the narrator’s intriguing puzzles to begin to figure out what Jesus is talking about before Jesus attempts to explain it to the uncomprehending characters in the story. Every bit as challenging to a listener would be all the allusions to Jewish traditions, which are the foundation of the Evangelist’s appeal for belief in Jesus, unless, that it, the listeners are already immersed in those traditions. If not already familiar with those traditions, a listener must try to get on board with them as well as with the double entendres, the misunderstandings, and the ironies. In other words, the listeners must (learn to) hear the narrative as Jews.\(^{13}\)

The second reason it may sound odd to propose that anyone listening to the Fourth Gospel needs to try to hear it as a Jew is that for such a long time Christian audiences have heard these stories from a perspective of Christian faith critical of Jews as a distinct and alienated religious community who have failed to see how their own traditions, named in the text, point to Jesus as Messiah. We have read the Gospel in a context of Christian contempt for Jews and reinforced that contempt by having Jesus

\(^{11}\) Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” \textit{Journal of Biblical Literature} 91:1 (March 1972), 70: “It could hardly be regarded as a missionary tract,” against scholars such as J. A. T. Robinson, W. C. van Unnik, C. H. Dodd, “for we may imagine that only a very rare outsider would get past the barrier of its closed metaphorical system.” It is a book for insiders, for if one already belonged to the Johannine community, then we may presume that the manifold bits of tradition that have taken distinctive form in the Johannine circle would be familiar, the ‘cross-references’ in the book . . . would be immediately recognizable, the double entendre which produces mystified and stupid questions from the fictional dialogue partners . . . would be acknowledged by a knowing and superior smile.”


\(^{13}\) This is not to deny that the Evangelist’s own conceptual world was shaped by non-Jewish influences (Barrett, \textit{Judaism}, 19), but only that the narrator appeals to Jewish traditions and takes on in controversy Jewish concerns.
speak to the Jews in the story with an air of superior and disdain. But despite that conscious division and alienation, we still have to hear the story as people who are familiar with Jewish traditions and norms or we miss a great deal of what is going on in the story. It is like seeing a play by Shakespeare and being ignorant of the allusions to the Bible and Greek and Roman mythology.

2. The Oral Story

How would the norms and cultural traditions of a first-century Jewish audience have colored the Evangelist’s oral rendering of this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman? By speaking in public with the woman—any woman—Jesus violates Judean cultural and religious norms. The Mishnah, a collection of rabbinic teachings compiled about 200 C.E., records the admonition of Jose ben Johanan of Jerusalem, a scribe who lived only about 150 C.E.: “Talk not much with woman-kind.” To this the Mishnah adds, “They said this of a man’s own wife: how much more of his fellow’s wife!” (Aboth 1,5)14 And Samaritan women were particularly objectionable people. According to a tradition in the Mishnah that comes from the last decades before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., “The daughters of the Samaritans are [deemed unclean as] menstruants from their cradle.” (Niddah 4,1. See Leviticus 15:19-20 concerning a woman’s menstrual flow as a source of impurity.)15

What is fascinating about this story from the Fourth Gospel is that the Evangelist chooses to locate this conversation between Jesus and the woman by a well, thus evoking the memory of stories in the Hebrew scriptures in which wells are settings for courtship between a man and a woman.16 Indeed Jacob, who gave the Samaritans of Sychar this well where this conversation between Jesus and the woman is taking place, meets Rachel at a well (though not this one; see Gen 29:1-12)! Robert Alter dubs such stories representatives of a “type-scene.” They are instances of a convention other instances of which have set up certain expectations in listeners and readers of what may transpire in this instance. What makes the story interesting is the way a particular story will vary the convention.17 By addressing the woman, is Jesus going to try to woo her? If so, he wooing a most objectionable woman!

This cultural background is bound to determine the Evangelist’s tone of voice as he sets the scene for the conversation. This Jew, Jesus, leaves Judea for Galilee and has to pass through Samaria to get there.18 Given the poor relationship between Judeans and Samaritans, this move would call for an ominous tone of voice. Step by step the narrator

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14 Herbert Danby, The Mishnah, Oxford, 1933, 446.
16 See Gen. 24:10-61; Gen. 29:1-12; Ex. 2:15-21.
18 D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John. Eerdmans, 215f, cites Josephus (Ant, xx, 118; Bell, ii, 232; Vita, 269) as acknowledging the hostility between Judeans and Samaritans yet reporting that the shorter route through Samaria was preferred.
sets the scene, drawing Jesus closer and close to the place of encounter. The next part of the description of the scene and the introduction of the woman increase the sense of foreboding. It is noon, the time when the sun is the hottest. Along comes a lone woman to draw water.

What is wrong with this picture? In the story of Abraham sending his servant to Nahor to get a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24), the women come to the well together in the evening, not alone in the middle of the day. This suggests that this woman is not only a Samaritan, but an outcast Samaritan woman as well. If we suspect it at the beginning, Jesus confirms our suspicion and the reason for her being an outcast later in the conversation. Five men in succession have found her disposable. Societies habitually blame the victim; so here she comes alone when it is hot and she can avoid the abuse of the other women.

Jesus then opens the conversation. His very speaking is shocking, scandalous to Jewish listeners! He asks her for a drink, just as the servant of Abraham asked Rebekah (Gen. 24:17). What is Jesus’ tone of voice? What is the woman’s tone of response? The conversation between Jesus and the woman is usually read in the tone of a conversation between a generous Jesus and a receptive woman. One person recently described the woman to me as humble in her response, expressing her unworthiness to receive such a great gift from him. The French scholar Lagrange described her as “mingling and coy with a certain light grace.” The latter attitude would certainly be appropriate to a courting scene by a well, were it not for the inter-ethnic hostility between the communities which these two characters represented. If this story of a man and a woman meeting at a well is going to end in anything like a marriage, this conflict presents an enormous hurdle for the characters to get over. Jesus and the woman are like Romeo and Juliet, children of two warring families whose love would seem doomed to disaster. If the teller does not somehow articulate that hurdle in the course of the telling, the most obvious twist on the well-story type scene is left unexploited.

Jesus does court the woman in the course of his responses and invitations to her, not, it turns out, in order to be her sixth husband after her current transitional relationship, but to be her Messiah; and by the end of the story he implicitly succeeds with her as he succeeds in his larger mission of drawing to him a great number of other Samaritans from her city. The woman’s last words in the story before she disappears into the crowd from Sychar are a question (v 29), which is answered in the final two short episodes of the

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20 The words *ou gar synchrontai Ioudaioi Samaritais* and are variously translated and understood as an explanatory comment by the narrator in every translation I have seen. Since the Greek text originally had no punctuation to indicate this, these words could as easily be a continuation of the woman’s bitter rebuff of this intrusive and brazen Jewish male.
21 The woman introduces her question with the Greek interrogative particle *meti*. BDAG describes it as “a marker that invites a negative response to the question that it
narrative, first by the many Samaritans who believe on the basis of her testimony, and then by many more who believe upon hearing Jesus’ own word. The question of the plot of the story is, Where does this relationship between Jesus and the woman start? On the high of male-female attraction, or in the pit of ethnic enmity? Here we wish to point out that, at the opening of the story, the words of the woman could be said in a tone of intense hostility towards Jesus, exhibiting the antipathy prevailing between the two communities. A Jewish audience who were themselves hostile to Samaritans would be surprised if the woman exhibited any other response to the Judean Jesus. It matches well the attitude of the disciples when they return from the city where they had gone to buy bread. They ask in their minds a question similar to hers: “What are you talking with her for?” They assume a wall between Jesus and a Samaritan woman, no doubt a compound wall, one between him as a male and her as a female, but also one between him as a Judean and her as a Samaritan.

What is surprising is Jesus’ attitude towards her. The content of his words do not articulate any negative response at all. Over the course of the conversation he first declares what he has to offer her and invites her to receive it from him. He later instructs her to call her husband and return, and he commends her for her honesty about having no husband and shares with her his knowledge of her sexual history with men. Now his words could be said with hostility, but such a tone would more likely escalate the hostility rather than calm it down, as apparently happens in the course of the woman’s responses. We will return to the question of Jesus’ tone at the end of this essay.

The second great movement in this narrative begins with the return of the disciples. Their response to seeing Jesus in conversation with a Samaritan woman expressed objection equal hers when Jesus first spoke to her. Their astonishment is presumably provoked, as hers was, both by the fact that she is a Samaritan and that Jesus is speaking in public with a woman. In fact, the first part of both her conversation with Jesus and the disciples’ conversation are strikingly parallel. (See chart at the end.) The disciples do not voice their objections aloud to Jesus; they confine them to inside their own heads. But the narrator voices their unspoken thoughts to the audience, and the tone of the storyteller’s voice should express hostility, this time from their side. It is as when a lover brings home his new love for family approval and is met with rejection instead. In the second half of the story Jesus seeks to overcome hostility from the Judean side of the equation. The result is left unarticulated, yielding a story similar to Luke’s parable of the Prodigal. There, too, the story is in two major halves. In the first the father receives back the younger and wayward son; in the second the father seeks to persuade his obedient older son to receive his brother back. The story ends without telling us how the older son responded to his father’s plea.

It is “somewhat more emphatic than the simple me”. But it can express not only certainty that the answer has to be “No!” (see v 12, v 33, and Mt 7:16: “Do people gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles?”) but also simply incredulity that the answer could be “Yes!” The particular question and the context determine the degree to which the answer “No” is anticipated. Here the context suggests a shadow of uncertainty about the answer.
It is critical to the impact of John’s story for the storyteller to express again the antipathy between Jews and Samaritans, this time from the side of Jesus’ Judean disciples. Therein, it would seem, lies the rhetorical purpose of the story. As the penultimate story in a sequence running through chapters 1-4 of Jewish testimonies to Jesus’ messiahship, testimonies which include stories of Jews won over or at least attracted to Jesus (John the Baptist, Andrew, Simon, and the other first disciples, and Nicodemus), this story of Jesus reaching out to include Samaritans is the first powerful test of a believing response on the part of Jewish listeners: can they accept a messiah who breaks down barriers between themselves and their despised religious siblings? After a final, briefer sign story in which yet another Jew, this time a basilikos, either a relative of Herod or a man in Herod’s service, brings his entire household to faith in Jesus when Jesus heals his son, the Evangelist launches into an extended testing of the listeners’ fledgling faith in the fire of controversy within the Judean community. The story of Jesus wooing of the Samaritans is the only story in the Gospel that fleshes out belief beyond the borders of the Judean community. When the next group of outsiders comes along, it sets the clock to Jesus’ final hour. In chapter 12 “Hellenes,” that is, gentiles, come and say to Philip, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Their desire is never realized, not within the Gospel narrative. Their desire sets up a potential waiting to be realized after the Evangelist’s story has ended. That potential is, of course, envisioned in statements like John 3:16, “For God so loved the world . . .,” but those statements name the horizon of salvation realized only in the story of the Samaritan woman and foreshadowed by the desire expressed by the Hellenes.

With this as the potential rhetorical impact of a telling of the story of the Samaritan woman that expresses and seeks to break down the wall separating Judeans from Samaritans, let us consider further the tone of Jesus’ voice proper to the clues in the Gospel. The tone of voice of the woman could well move from hostility to a hope that she can barely dare to let in, the hope that Jesus is the awaited Messiah. The voice of the disciples expresses offense, but there is no extension of the dialogue that shows them softening in their attitude; there is only Jesus’ plea to embrace the woman and her fellow

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22 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. by Frederick W. Danker, basilikos. BDAG cites A. Mead as saying that this man was not necessarily a Jew. Perhaps, after a story about Samaritans, listeners would wonder whether this encounter takes Jesus completely beyond communities rooted in Hebrew traditions. The narrator, however, does nothing to encourage such a question.

23 In the early 1970’s Tom Boomershine first observed in a personal conversation this movement from a barrage of appeals based on Jewish traditions and norms in the chapters 1-4, followed by a testing of faith in chapter 5-12, and then in chapters 13-17 a securing of faith at the supper table in preparation for the trials and struggle-filled mission to come. See more recently D. A. Carson, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:30-31 Reconsidered,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1987), 639-651.

24 There is wide agreement that these are not Hellenistic Jews, despite J. A. T. Robinson’s contention. See Barrett, *Judaism*, 11, 18f.
Samaritans. What is Jesus' tone in response to these intense emotional objections to his behavior? Is he simply laying out his claims and invitations with cool objectivity for their evaluation? Is he holding himself aloof from any emotional investment in the result? Is he a non-anxious presence in the midst of all these intensely hostile feelings? Does he abstain from attempting to influence the emotions of his conversation partners with other strong emotions of his own? Alternatively is he not cool but unfriendly, harsh, scolding, and disparaging?

It is frankly difficult to imagine Jesus initiating a potentially explosive conversation without possessing an intense desire on his part to overcome the inevitable negative reactions, without possessing in himself a powerful positive antidote. The Evangelist roots the ministry of Jesus in the love God has for the world. (John 3:16!) Can a story that makes the love of God the generator of the Word’s fleshly presence in his own world and among his own possessions and people to bring them life and light possibly be told or read in away that renders that enfleshed Word “cool and aloof,” that is, objective, or “not a welcoming sort of fellow,” “combative and stern,” and “harsh,” that is, negative in his feelings towards people? Can Jesus love this Samaritan woman, a love suggested by the very setting of the conversation at a well, and not express and communicate that love to her through his tone of voice in his effort to woo her? Would he not speak in a way that expresses his desire for her love? As he speaks, would he not lean in closer to her, speaking warmly, so as to draw her into the welcoming embrace of his love? And as he seeks to open his disciples to embracing the Samaritans, will he simply instruct them and command them, or will he speak passionately about what has been taking place, about the seeds that have been planted and have already come to fruition, reading for harvesting, seeking to awaken a shared passion in them?

3. No Reading Without Interpretation

*Emotion is an inescapable ingredient of language,* infusing every word we read from a text, whether with conscious intent or unconscious intuition or tradition, indeed, whether silently or aloud. In the nearly complete absence in Biblical texts of directions in the text for what emotion is called for in a given utterance, the reader necessarily intuits an emotion, based either on the content of the text and what she or he knows of the background, on the way he or she has heard the text read in the past. The reigning tradition for reading the Bible in the white West has been a tradition of objectivity, or

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26 On rare occasion the text explicitly attributes a feeling to a character, e.g. Jn 4:27: the disciples “marveled” (*ethaumazon*) that Jesus was speaking with a woman. Such directions for expressing the words of the characters that follow are consistently ignored by those committed to the tradition of objective reading.
“artlessness,” even when that objective stance conflicts with explicit statements about feelings in the text, e.g. the disciples’ astonishment (v 27). This tradition is taken for granted and followed largely unconsciously, until, that is, a reader introduces some other emotional stance than dispassion. Oddly, in objecting to a dramatic, engaging way of sounding the text, the objectors frequently claim that their reading is interpretation-free. This claim is based on an old view of language that continues to enjoy wide currency.

In an essay on Herder’s view of language by Charles Taylor, he offers this description of the objective stance:

We take up an “objective” stance, for instance, coldly examining the objects under review, and this emerges in our style of speech and the words we use, while at the same time we hold our interlocutor at a distance with our aloof air; or else perhaps we invite him warmly into the brotherhood of initiates, distinct from the surrounding unscientific world. We both take up and broadcast these stances through our expressive behavior . . . . For we have to distinguish the way in which my severe mien and choice of neutral words express my aloofness towards you, from the way in which my facial twitches or trembling may show you my agitation. The first is genuinely expression, and it is a condition for this that, even if at an entirely unarticulated level, these behaviors carry the meaning of aloofness for me . . . .

This description is articulated in the context of Taylor’s discussion Herder’s critique of a still very widespread by demonstratively mistaken view of language that regards words as atoms which get added together to make meaning, that signify things without having any “background” or “placing” in relation to each other, let alone to the speaker’s experience and the experience of the speaker’s listeners. Taylor’s description makes it clear that an objective reading is itself an interpretation. The claim that we can read a text neutrally appears to be the product of this older and demonstrably incorrect way of thinking about language, a view of language that ignores the fact language is always expressive.

A major theme sounded in a number of Charles Taylor’s works on the modern worldview is the way significant ingredients of modern thought remain unarticulated, and are even aggressively rejected as assumptions to be articulated and evaluated alongside alternatives. This commitment to objective reading on the part of some, along with a certainty that such a reading is interpretatively neutral, an atom of meaning without any background or placing in relation to anything else – a view often passionately held, we may note – is often accompanied by a complete lack of interest in subjecting that view to

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27 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 55-56: “How shall we read the Scriptures? . . . it will soon become apparent that it is not easy to read the Bible aloud for others. The more artless, the more objective, the more humble one’s attitude towards the material is, the better will the reading accord with the subject. . . .”

28 Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, Harvard, 1995, 86. Italics added. See also 109: “even when we are engaged in disinterested description, we are as speakers projecting a certain stance to our interlocutors and to the matter at hand.”
any critical examination, the kind of excluding of the question from consideration that Taylor observes in other components of the modern paradigm.

4. Reading Aloud, Theology, & Politics

There are some rather identifiable Christological and political understandings generated by the prevailing oral interpretations of the Fourth Gospel, and of the words of Jesus in particular, which in turn reinforce those oral interpretations. To begin with, there are ingredients of the Fourth Evangelist’s narrative that lead people to the view that Jesus is either “cool and aloof,” or “not a welcoming sort of fellow,” “combative and stern,” and “harsh,” as Robert Kysar describes him. As evidence Kysar points to the “long and complicated” speeches, “often rambling,” and the fact Jesus speaks so much of himself. He also is eager to maintain the distinctiveness of John’s Jesus over again the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels. “Let us not water down the aloof, foreign Jesus with the ‘friend’ Jesus is to the disciples,” he exhorts us. The combination of this tone, a Christology that makes universal claims in a post-modern climate unwilling to talk about truth, and a rhetoric that has been heard as anti-Jewish for most of Christian history and has been used to perpetrate atrocities upon Jews – these three ingredients of the Fourth Gospel as it is performed and heard today constitute a bundle of liabilities that are difficult to disentangle either from each other or from the uses to which they have been put. In this essay we have been proposing an alternative oral performance in a community in which all listeners would have heard the narrative as Jews and met a Jesus who, while claiming to be the true revelation of the Father, did so not as an aloof, or an unfriendly, harsh, and condemning “God walking on the face of the earth,” but as a human being who incarnated a warmly expressed, passionate, self-sacrificing and life-giving love that he claimed was the very love of God. If throughout history those who have believed in Jesus had sustained a life like that of this Jesus, Christian history would have taken a very different course and the relationship between believing “Christians” and non-believing “Jews” would have very different. In our present climate we may never be able to hear the Fourth Gospel’s appeal to Jewish traditions and norms as valid pointers to Jesus’ Messiahship. That would most likely be taken to undermine the alternative interpretations by modern Jews and commend belief in Jesus as true and Judaism as false. But if we could find our way to performing the Gospel in a less noxious tone, a tone which we believe is more faithful to the clues in the text and context, and if we could learn to hear the Gospel’s claims against a context that was far less divided than our own and that of the church from the fourth century on, then perhaps we could at least give this Evangelist a more sympathetic hearing in place of the alienated hearing and alienating performance through which it is heard today.

Along comes a woman of Samaria to draw water!

Jesus says to her, “Give me a drink.”

(His disciples, you see, had gone off into the city to buy provisions.)

So the Samaritan woman says to him, “How do you, a Judean, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?! Judeans don’t have anything to do with Samaritans!”

Jesus answered and said to her, “If you recognized the gift of God and who it is who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have give you living water.”

The woman says to him, “Sir, you don’t have a bucket, and the well is deep. So where do you have the living water from? . . . .”

Jesus answered and said to her, “All who drink this water will be thirsty again. But those who drink the water I shall give them shall not be thirsty ever, but the water I shall give them will become in them a well of water bubbling up to eternal life.”

Just then his disciples arrived, and they were astounded that he was speaking with a woman!

But no one said, “What do you want?” or “What are you talking with her for?!”

Meanwhile his disciples were begging him, “Rabbi, eat!”

He said to them, “I have food you don’t know anything about.”

They began saying to one another, “Surely nobody brought him anything to eat – did they?”

Jesus says to them, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to accomplish his work.