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Craig R. Koester

Luther Seminary, ckoester@luthersem.edu

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“THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD”
(JOHN 4:42)

Craig R. Koester

Abstract: Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4 draws on themes of Roman imperialism and Samaria’s colonial history. The Samaritan townspeople call Jesus “the Savior of the world” (4:42), a title used for Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to Hadrian. They go out to meet Jesus and welcome him to their town, a practice used to welcome emperors and other dignitaries. Using a title of empire-wide significance emphasizes that Jesus now transcends older national divisions. The Samaritan woman speaks as an individual and representative of her people. Her personal history with five husbands parallels her national history of colonization by five nations and their introduction of foreign worship. Her current situation with a sixth figure might also point to the continuation of her people’s colonial experience with Roman domination and the imperial cult at Sebaste. By calling Jesus “Savior of the World” the Samaritan townspeople show that Jesus fulfills and surpasses their national hopes. They move beyond a form of worship tainted by charges of idolatry to true worship of God, and beyond a national identity defined by colonial powers to become true people of God.

The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritans in John 4 reaches a climax when the people of Sychar acclaim him “the Savior of the world” (4:42). This title appears nowhere else in the Fourth Gospel and was not a typical messianic designation in first-century Jewish or Samaritan thought. The term “savior” did enjoy wide currency in the Greco-Roman world, how-ever, and the full title “Savior of the world” was used for the emperor. The similarity between the imperial use of the title and John 4:42 has often been noted,¹ but its implications for interpreting the narrative as a whole have not been fully explored. Nevertheless, the title offers a promising approach to several facets of the text.

I. Universal Savior

The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan townspeople provides an appropriate setting for a title with imperial connotations. Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman outside the town of Sychar, beside Jacob’s well. After their conversation, the woman returned to town and announced his arrival by saying, “Come see a man who told me all that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” (4:29). When the townspeople heard this, “they went out of the city and were coming to him” (4:30), while Jesus remained outside of town with his

¹ E.g., W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) 314; A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Greco-Roman World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910) 363-65; E. Lohmeyer, *Christuskult und Kaiserkult* (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1919) 36; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB 29-29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970) 1. 175; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Crossroad, 1968-82) 1. 457-58; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 244; E. Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1-6* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 226.

disciples. As the Samaritans approached Jesus, the evangelist repeated what the woman had told them, adding that “many Samaritans believed in him because of the woman’s word” (4:39). When the townspeople finally arrived at the place where Jesus was, they asked him to remain with them, which he did, and during his two-day visit many more believed in him, acclaiming him “the Savior of the world” (4:40-42).

By going out of Sychar to meet Jesus, inviting him into their town, and calling him “savior,” the Samaritans gave Jesus a welcome similar to those granted to visiting rulers. During the Jewish revolt, for example, Vespasian arrived at the city of Tiberias and “the population opened their gates to him and went out to meet him, hailing him as savior and benefactor” (*J.W.* 3.9.8 §459). Later, Vespasian returned to Rome as emperor, and when news of his arrival was reported, the populace went to the roadsides outside the city to receive him, “hailing him as benefactor, savior, and only worthy emperor of Rome” (*J.W.* 7.4.1 §70–71). A similar reception was granted to his son Titus when he approached the town of Gishala after some Jewish brigands had fled. “The gates were opened to him by the people, who came out with their wives and children, and hailed him as benefactor and liberator of their town from bondage ... and they besought him to enter the town and punish the insurgents who remained” (*J.W.* 4.2.5 §112-13). Later, he received similar welcomes at Antioch and Rome (*J.W.* 7.5.2–3 §100-103, 119).

The title “savior” itself was used in various ways in the ancient world and was not reserved for imperial use.² In Greco-Roman sources it was used for gods like Zeus, Asclepius, Isis, and Serapis, and for philosophers and leaders of various ranks. The translators of the LXX also used the title both for God (e.g., Isa 45:15, 21) and for human deliverers like Othniel and Ehud (Judg 3:9, 15). Philo occasionally called God “savior of the world” (σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου, *Spec.* 2.198) and “savior of all” (σωτήρ τοῦ πάντος, *Deus* 156; ὁ πάντων σωτήρ, *Fug.* 162) and in the second century the orator Aelius Aristides referred to the god Asclepius as “savior of all people” (σωτήρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων) and “savior of all” (σωτήρ τῶν ὅλων).³

Nevertheless, in the first century, the title “Savior of the world” had striking imperial connotations. Various forms of the title were used for Roman rulers from Julius Caesar to Hadrian and later emperors, as can be seen in the following list.⁴

² P. Wendland, “Soter,” *ZNW* 5 (1904) 335-53; H. Lietzmann, *Der Weltheiland: Eine Jenaer Rosenvorlesung mit Anmerkungen* (Bonn: A. Marcus & E. Weber, 1909); W. Otto, “Augustus Soter,” *Hermes* 45 (1910) 448-60; F. J. Dölger, “Der Heiland,” in *Antike und Christentum* 6 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1950) 241-72; A. D. Nock, “Soter and Euergetes,” in *The Joy of Study: Papers on the New Testament and Related Subjects Presented to Honor Frederick Clifton Grant* (ed. S. E. Johnson; New York: Macmillan, 1951); W. Foerster and G. Fohrer, “σωτήρ,” *TDNT* 7. 1003-21; M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 100-103.

³ εἰς τὸν Σάραπιν (53.2) and λαλιὰ εἰς Ἀσκηπιόν (37.22), in *Aristides* (ed. W. Dindorf; Leipzig: Reimer, 1829; reprinted Hildesheim: Olms, 1924) vol. 1.

⁴ Collected by D. Magie, *De romanorum iuris publici sacrique vocabulis sollemnibus in graecum sermonem conversis* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1905) 67-68. The inscriptions reflect popular acclaim for the emperor in the Levant. On Hadrian, see also W. Weber, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Kaisers Hadrians* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1907) 157, 225-26, 241, 250. Related titles include σωτήρ καὶ εὐεργέτης τοῦ σύμπαντος τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένους, “savior and benefactor of the whole human race” (*Select Papyri* [ed. A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963] 76-79); σωτήρ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένους, “savior of the common race of men” (*TDNT* 7.1012); κοινὸς τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου βίου σωτήρ, “savior of the common human life” (MM, 621).

<i>Title</i>	<i>Period</i>
σωτήρ τῆς οἰκουμένης	Julius Caesar Claudius, Hadrian
σωτήρ τῶν Ἑλλήνων τε καὶ τῆς οἰκουμένης πάσης	Augustus
εὐεργέτης καὶ σωτήρ τοῦ σύμπαντος κόσμου	Augustus, Tiberius
σωτήρ καὶ εὐεργέτης οἰκουμένης	Nero, Titus ⁵
σωτήρ καὶ εὐεργέτης τοῦ κόσμου	Vespasian
σωτήρ τοῦ παντὸς κόσμου	Trajan
ὁ παντὸς κόσμου σωτήρ καὶ εὐεργέτης	Trajan
σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου	Hadrian

Taken together, the use of the full title “Savior of the world;” rather than the more typical “savior” or “benefactor,” in a scene where Jesus was welcomed by the townspeople on the road and invited into the city, suggests that the passage was intended to evoke imperial associations.⁶

In the context of chap. 4, the title “Savior of the world” culminates a series of affirmations of Jesus’ identity. The Samaritan woman first identified Jesus as a Jew (4:9), and indeed Jesus spoke as a Jew when he said, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (4:22). Jesus’ knowledge of the woman’s life story prompted her to identify him as a prophet, and he spoke as a prophet when he foretold the coming of a form of worship that would not be bound to either Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim (4:21, 23). The woman then expressed her hope for a coming “messiah” who would tell her people “all things” (ἅπαντα, 4:25). Jesus claimed the title by saying “I am, the one speaking to you” (4:26), perhaps using the expression “I am” (ἐγὼ εἰμι)—which recalls the name of God elsewhere in the Gospel (e.g., 6:20; 8:58; 18:5)—to hint that he might be more than the woman expected.⁷ The woman reported that Jesus had indeed told her “all things” (πάντα) about herself, and she wondered if he could be the expected Christ (4:29).⁸

The title “Savior of the world” included and surpassed the previous expressions of Jesus’ identity. By calling Jesus “savior” (σωτήρ), the townspeople recognized that “salvation” (σωτηρία) is from the Jews” but is for all people (4:22). They formerly worshiped what they did not know (οἴδατε, 4:22), but they finally come to know (οἴδαμεν, 4:42) who Jesus is. Their confession expressed a faith that provided a foundation for worship that was not bound to Jerusalem or Gerizim; Jesus’ prophecy was coming to pass. Jesus was Messiah, but when the Samaritans called him “the Savior of the world” they used

⁵ On the use of this title for Nero, see MM, 621.

⁶ The only other place “savior of the world” is used in the NT is 1 John 4:14, where a connection with the imperial use of the title is not clear; see R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982) 523; R. Schnackenburg, *Die Johannesbriefe* (HTKNT 13/3; 2d ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1963) 243. An echo of the title’s imperial usage might be suggested by references to “conquering the world” in 1 John 5:4-5; cf. 4:4. The use of “savior” in Luke 2:11 may contrast Jesus with Augustus, who is mentioned in 2:1. See R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979) 415-16.

⁷ See Brown, *John*, 1. 172; Schnackenburg, *John*, 1. 442; G. O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 72-73. Contrast Barrett, *John*, 239; Haenchen, *John* 1, 224.

⁸ The question in 4:29 begins with μήτι, which often expects a negative answer, but here expresses tentativeness (BDF §427 [2]).

a title that was associated not with Samaritan or Jewish messianic expectations but with worldwide dominion. They recognized that Jesus transcended national boundaries; like Caesar he was a figure of universal significance.⁹

II. Savior of a World Estranged from God

The title's theological depth emerges when we connect it with references to Christ saving the world elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel.¹⁰ The evangelist does not use the words "savior" and "salvation" outside this narrative, but 3:17 says "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." At the conclusion of his public ministry, Jesus repeats, "I did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world" (12:47). These statements about Christ's saving action appear in contexts where "the world" is portrayed as a realm of darkness (3:19–20; 12:46). The world was created by God (1:3), but had become estranged and hostile toward its Creator. God sent the Son to save the world by bringing it to believe "in the name of the only Son of God" (3:18). Faith in Christ restores the world to a right relationship with God because, as Jesus said, "He who believes in me, believes not in me, but in him who sent me" (12:45). The Samaritans acclaimed Jesus as savior when they began to "believe" (4:39, 41–42). If their declaration is consistent with the view of salvation elsewhere in the Gospel, their faith marks the return of a part of the unbelieving world to God.

The evangelist portrays the Samaritan woman in a way that presents the Samaritan people as part of a world estranged from God. Interpreters have often suggested that the woman's marital infidelity corresponds to the religious infidelity of the Samaritan people.¹¹

⁹ Schnackenburg, *John*, 1. 457; Haenchen, *John* 1, 226; O'Day, *Revelation*, 89; H. Boers, *Neither on This Mountain Nor in Jerusalem: A Study of John 4* (SBLMS 35; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 85–86, 93–94, 118–19, 128–30, 199–200. A number of interpreters rightly detect echoes of biblical courtship scenes in John 4:1–42. E.g., M. E. Boismard, "Aenon près de Salem: Jean III, 23," *RB* 80 (1973) 218–29, esp. 223–26; J. H. Neyrey, "Jacob Traditions and the Interpretation of John 4:10–26," *CBQ* 41 (1979) 419–37, esp. 425–26. C. M. Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman," *NTS* 26 (1979–80) 332–46; P. J. Cahill, "Narrative Art in John IV," *Religious Studies Bulletin* 2 (1982) 41–48; P. D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 101–3; M. Girard, "Jésus en Samarie (Jean 4,1–42): Analyse des structures stylistique et du processus de symbolization," *Eglise et Théologie* 17 (1986) 275–310, esp. 302–4. Nevertheless, it is not the woman's father but the townspeople who greet Jesus and the episode concludes with a civic reception rather than a betrothal.

¹⁰ See Schnackenburg, *John*, 1. 457–58.

¹¹ A. Loisy, *Le quatrième évangile* (2d ed.; Paris: Nourry, 1921) 182; W. Bauer, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1933) 75–76; E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (2d ed.; London: Faber, 1947) 242–43; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953) 313; J. Marsh, *Saint John* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968) 215–16. B. Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (ConB 6; Lund: Gleerup, 1974) 184–86; Carmichael, "Marriage," 332–46; Neyrey, "Jacob Traditions," 426; O. Betz, "To Worship God in Spirit and in Truth: Reflections on John 4,20–26," in *Standing Before God: Studies in Prayer in Scriptures and in Tradition with Essays. In Honor of J. M. Oesterreicher* (New York: Ktav, 1981) 57; Cahill, "Narrative Art" 44; Girard, "Jésus en Samarie," 301–2. H. G. Kippenberg, *Garizim und Synagoge: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur samaritanischen Religion der aramäischen Periode* (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 30; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971) 115–16. An extreme form of this interpretation is that of H. Strathmann, *Das Evangelium Johannes* (NTD 4; 10th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963) 82. Others acknowledge possible connections between the woman's personal and national history, but do not understand them to be primary (Schnackenburg, *John*, 1. 420–21, 433; Brown, *John*, 1. 171; Barrett, *John*, 235).

The woman formerly had five husbands. The evangelist did not say whether she was divorced or widowed, but by almost any estimate a series of five husbands seems excessive—the rabbis permitted a widow to marry a second or at most a third time.¹² Moreover, the woman was living with a sixth man, out of desire or necessity, in a relationship that was not actually a marriage. The Samaritan woman's history was tragic at best, sinful at worst. Similarly, the Samaritan nation originated when five foreign nations with their pagan deities were settled in the region of Samaria after the fall of the northern kingdom (2 Kgs 17:24, 29-31). Although the biblical account lists seven gods, Josephus's version of the story implies that there were only five (*Ant.* 9.14.3 §288). The sixth relationship has been compared to the syncretistic form of Yahwism practiced alongside the pagan cults at Samaria (2 Kgs 17:28, 32-34). The OT frequently compares religious apostasy to sexual unfaithfulness,¹³ and if John 4:16-18 is read in this way it provides a natural transition to the subject of worship in 4:20 and to Jesus' statement that the Samaritans worshiped what they did not know (4:22).

This interpretation of the passage has been sharply challenged for several reasons.¹⁴ (1) Such an interpretation is perceived as a kind of "allegorizing" which disregards the literal meaning of the text and is alien to the Fourth Gospel. (2) As an allegory, the interpretation quickly breaks down when pressed. Josephus notwithstanding, 2 Kgs 17:30-31 indicates that there were actually seven deities introduced into Samaria, and these cults functioned simultaneously whereas the woman would have had her husbands successively. The idea that the Samaritans' worship of Yahweh could be depicted as the most illegitimate of the Samaritan cults would have seemed blasphemous to the evangelist. Moreover, the Samaritan's worship of Yahweh was based on Mosaic statutes and was not as syncretistic as sometimes alleged. (3) The evangelist deals with first-century disputes between Jews and Samaritans, but the origin of the Samaritan nation was an issue that belonged to the past.

These criticisms rightly caution against an allegorical interpretation of the text which would demand a one-to-one correspondence between aspects of the woman's personal life and events in her nation's history. Nevertheless, many scholars, including some who reject the allegorical interpretation of 4:1-42, have recognized that the evangelist sometimes does present individual characters as representatives of larger groups.¹⁵ Several examples will illustrate the evangelist's method and enable us to discern more clearly how he portrays the woman as a representative of the Samaritan people and a fallen world.

First, the context may indicate that an individual is a spokesperson for a larger group, and the dialogue itself may alternate between singular and plural forms of address. A good example is Nicodemus, who is regularly taken to be the Samaritan woman's counterpart. In

¹² Str-B 2. 437.

¹³ E.g., Hos 2:2, 7, 16, where God is Israel's ἀνήρ (LXX), and Jer 2:1-13, which uses marriage imagery and contrasts God's "living water" with the broken cistern of idolatry.

¹⁴ See esp. J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1928) 1. 143-44; G. Friedrich, *Wer ist Jesus? Die Verkündigung des 4. Evangelisten dargestellt an Johannes 4,4-42* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1967) 37; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972) 186-87; Haenchen, *John 1*, 221, 227; L. Cantwell, "Immortal Longings in Sermone Humili: A Study of John 4.5-26," *SJT* 36 (1983) 73-86; G. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco: Word, 1987) 61; Boers, *Neither on This Mountain*, 171-72.

¹⁵ E.g., R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 188 n. 3; Friedrich, *Wer ist Jesus*, 37.

2:23 the evangelist reports that while Jesus was in Jerusalem for Passover, “many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did.” Nicodemus, who appears in the next scene, seems to represent such people when he tells Jesus, “We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do the signs that you do unless God is with him” (3:2). In his responses to Nicodemus, Jesus shifts from the singular to the plural, suggesting that he speaks for his followers as well as himself and that he addresses Nicodemus and people like him. “Do not marvel that I say to you (σοι) that you people (ὑμᾶς) must be born anew. . . . Truly, truly I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you people do not receive our testimony” (3:7, 11–12).¹⁶

Second, the evangelist sometimes enhances a character’s representative features by alluding to the person’s ancestors.¹⁷ A good example is Nathanael, whose story, like that of the Samaritan woman, unfolds through Jesus’ uncanny knowledge of his identity. Nathanael was presumably “an Israelite,” a member of the people of Israel who had a Hebrew name and came from Cana in Galilee (21:2). Yet Nathanael’s identity is presented through allusions to the story of Jacob, who was the first to bear the name “Israel” (Gen 32:28; John 1:47), who was noted for guile (Gen 27:35; John 1:47), and who saw a vision of angels ascending and descending (Gen 28:12; John 1:51). Nathanael gradually emerges as a representative of the true Israelites who believe in Jesus and recognize him as king. Accordingly, Jesus first addressed him in the second person singular, “You shall see (ὄψῃ) greater things than these” (1:50b), then shifted to the second person plural, suggesting that his words applied to Nathanael and to people like him. “He said to him, ‘You people will see (ὄψεσθε) heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man’” (1:51).¹⁸

Third, a character may assume representative significance by mirroring the experiences of the Johannine community. The best-known example is the man born blind (chap. 9), who, like the Samaritan woman, remains anonymous. As the story opens, Jesus alternates between the singular and plural again, saying “We must work the works of him who sent me” (9:4a), which suggests that the encounter has representative significance. The man was questioned by Jewish authorities who had already agreed that anyone confessing Jesus to be the Christ should be put out of the synagogue (9:22); a similar threat also confronted the post-Easter community (16:2). The interrogation took place after Jesus had departed from the scene, and early Christians also had to testify to their faith after Jesus’ departure to the Father.¹⁹

These same techniques are used in the portrayal of the woman at Jacob’s well. The woman is an individual, yet is presented as a representative of her people though the use of context and plural forms of speech. Her name is not given; the evangelist simply calls her “a woman of Samaria” or “the Samaritan woman” (4:7, 9). When Jesus asks her for a drink she responds by raising the issue of national differences. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (4:9a). The evangelist confirms the validity of her

¹⁶ Note the similar use of the second person plural in 4:48.

¹⁷ Extensive use of allusions to OT ancestors also appears in 8:33-59.

¹⁸ On the role of Jacob in John 1, see recently J. H. Neyrey, “The Jacob Allusions in John 1:51,” *CBQ* 44 (1982) 586-605. Neyrey follows Bultmann in arguing that the shift from singular to plural speech shows that 1:51 is a late addition to the text. Nevertheless, 1:51 is thoroughly integrated into its context and stylistically consistent with the rest of the gospel.

¹⁹ See esp. J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2d ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 27-30. On anonymity, see Duke, *Irony*, 118-19.

question by adding that “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (4:9b). When Jesus suddenly offers her living water the woman continues to speak as a member of her people. “Are you greater than *our* father Jacob, who gave us this well . . . ?” (4:12). She identifies Jesus as a prophet when he reveals his knowledge of her personal life, but tests his prophetic powers by raising an issue of national importance: Should worship take place at Gerizim or Jerusalem? During the discussion of the issue, both Jesus and the woman speak in first and second person plurals, as representatives of the Jewish and Samaritan peoples.

The woman said to him ... “*Our* fathers worshiped at this mountain and *you people* (ὁμοῦς) say that in Jerusalem is the place where it is necessary to worship.” Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when neither at this mountain nor in Jerusalem will *you people* worship the Father. *You people* worship what you do not know. *We* worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” (4:19-22)

Jesus then announces the advent of worship in Spirit and truth, and the woman voices a messianic hope that is both personal and national. “I know that messiah is coming . . . he will declare all things *to us*” (4:25).

The statements about true worship in 4:19-22, quoted above, clearly provide a perspective on the Samaritan people as a whole and allude both to the Samaritans’ ancestors and to contemporary disputes. The woman referred to a form of worship instituted by her ancestors when she said “our fathers worshiped on this mountain” (4:20). One of her ancestors was “our father Jacob” (4:12), who had bought a piece of land near Shechem and erected an altar on the spot (Gen 33:18-20). Later Jacob gave the land, including a mountain slope (שכמ), to his son Joseph (Gen 48:22), as noted in John 4:5. Moses eventually commanded an altar to be built on the mountain near Shechem (Deut 27:4); the mountain was Gerizim according to the Samaritan Pentateuch, Ebal according to the MT.

Familiarity with Samaritan history and current Jewish-Samaritan disputes seems to inform Jesus’ response to the woman, a response that initially reflects a Jewish perspective: “You people worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (4:22). The verse has sometimes been taken as a gloss, since elsewhere in the Gospel Jesus is frequently in conflict with the Jews, charging that they are the ones who do not know the God they claim to worship (7:28; 8:19, 54-55).²⁰ Yet Jesus was Jewish, called the Jerusalem temple “my Father’s house” (2:16), and in him salvation would come “from the Jews,” although it would be received by others.²¹ Jesus’ words recalled Jewish polemics against idolatry. The book of Isaiah, for example, says “All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know, that they might be put to shame.” “They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut . . . their minds so they cannot understand” (Isa 44:9, 18). Later Jewish writings continued to associate idolatry with ignorance. Wis 13:1-2 said that “all men who were ignorant of God

²⁰ Bultmann, *John*, 189 n. 6; Friedrich, *Wer ist Jesus*, 43; Haenchen, *John 1*, 222; Boers, *Neither on This Mountain*, 28, 194-95. Most scholars now take 4:22 as a part of the text. See esp. F. Hahn, “‘Das Heil kommt von den Juden’: Erwägungen zu Joh 4,22b,” in *Wort und Wirklichkeit: Festschrift für E. L. Rapp* (ed. B. Benzing, O. Böcher, G. Mayer; Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1976) 1. 67–84; I. de la Potterie, “‘Noun adorons, nous, ce que connaissons, car le salut vient des Juifs’: Histoire de l’exégèse et interpretation de Jn 4,22;” *Bib* 64 (1983) 74-115.

²¹ W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 41 n. 2; Barrett, *John*, 237.

were foolish,” since they supposed that aspects of nature “were the gods that ruled the world.”²²

Jesus’ statement about the Samaritans worshiping what they do not know has sometimes been compared to Paul’s comment about the altar “to an unknown god” in Athens (Acts 17:23), but Jewish perspectives on the Samaritans and Samaritan history provide a better context for the remark.²³ Ben Sira called the Samaritans “the foolish people that dwell in Shechem” (Sir 50:25-26) and *T. Levi* 7:2 called Shechem the “city of the senseless.” Josephus said that during the persecutions under Antiochus Epiphanes, the Samaritans tried to distinguish themselves from Jews, claiming that their ancestors had “erected a temple without a name on the mountain called Garzein.” They called Antiochus their “benefactor and savior,” asking him not to accuse them of the things of which the Jews were guilty, and that “the temple without a name be known as that of Zeus Hellenios” (*Ant.* 12.5.5 §259-61; cf. 2 Macc 6:2).

In the first century, Samaritans believed that Moses had hidden the vessels of the tabernacle on Mt. Gerizim (*Ant.* 18.4.1 §85), but Jews insisted that the situation was quite different. Pseudo-Philo claimed that the seven golden idols of the Amorites were “stored beneath the summit of Mount Shechem” (*Bib. Ant.* 25:10).²⁴ Jews could even connect idolatry in Samaria with Jacob, who figures prominently in the first part of John 4. Jacob’s wife Rachel—whom he first courted beside a well (Gen 29:1-2)—stole her father’s household gods and hid them (31:19, 34). Jacob himself eventually hid all the foreign gods in his household beneath the oak near Shechem (35:4), creating a deposit of idols in the shadow of Mt. Gerizim. Later Jewish sources invoked this text as evidence of Samaritan idolatry. The following story about R. Ishmael b. R. Yose (ca. AD 180) is told as a comment on Gen 35:4.²⁵

R. Ishmael b. R. Yose went up to pray in Jerusalem. When he went by the Palatinus [Gerizim], a Samaritan saw him and asked him, “Where are you going?” He said to him, “To pray in Jerusalem.” He said to him, “Wouldn’t it be better for you to pray on this holy mountain and not on that dunghill?” He said to him, “Shall I tell you what you are like? you are like a dog lusting after carrion. So, because you know that idols are hidden under that mountain, in light of this verse, ‘and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem; therefore you lust after that mountain.’” (*Gen. Rab.* 81:3)

When Jesus said, “You people worship what you do not know” (4:22), he acknowledged the idolatrous tendencies of the Samaritans, but immediately added that “the hour is

²² Cf. Wis 15:14-15; *Ep. Arist.* 138; Philo *Decal.* 52, 59, 69; *Spec.* 1.15; Acts 17:29-30. D. Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (AB 43; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979) 248-50. Neyrey points out that in Gen 28:16 Jacob says, “surely the Lord is in the place and I did not know it,” while later Samaritan tradition insists that Jacob knew Gerizim (“Jacob Traditions,” 432).

²³ See K. Haacker, “Gottesdienst ohne Gotteserkenntnis. Joh 4,22 vor dem Hintergrund der jüdisch-samaritanischen Auseinandersetzung,” in *Wort und Wirklichkeit* 1. 110-26. Cf. Betz, “To worship God,” 56; de la Potterie, “Nous adorons,” 96. On Sir 50:25-26, see R. Egger, *Josephus Flavius und die Samaritaner: Eine terminologische Untersuchung zur Identitätsklärung der Samaritaner* (NTOA 4; Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 85-92.

²⁴ On these traditions, see my work *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature and the New Testament* (CBQMS 22; Washington, DC: CBA, 1989) 48-58.

²⁵ Str-B 1. 549. Translation from *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (trans. J. Neusner; BJS 104-6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985) 3. 161.

coming, and now is, when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you people worship the Father” (4:23), anticipating the imminent arrival of true worship in Samaria. The Samaritan woman had spoken of the worship instituted by “our fathers,” which was associated with national disputes and charges of idolatry. But Jesus spoke of worship instituted by “the Father,” that is, by God himself. The worship of the Father, unlike the worship of the fathers, would transcend national divisions, be engendered by God’s Spirit, and be characterized by truth. Jesus established the basis of such worship in Samaria, thus saving a portion of the idolatrous world by bringing it to faith. Therefore, the Samaritans rightly acknowledged that salvation had come from the Jews in the person of Jesus, whom they acclaimed “Savior of the world” in a way consistent with references to Christ’s saving of the world elsewhere in the Gospel.

III. Christ and Caesar

In the context in which the Fourth Evangelist wrote, the Gospel’s theological claims had social and political implications. Recent interpreters have been hesitant to understand 4:42 as a polemic against the emperor, but when the Samaritans said, “this is *truly* the Savior of the world,” they seemed to exclude the use of the title for other figures, including Caesar.²⁶ We must ask, therefore, if other aspects of chap. 4 suggest that 4:42 implicitly offset imperial claims, and, if so, how it fits into the larger context of the Gospel and the evangelist’s own historical situation.

An important perspective is provided by Jesus’ comments on the woman’s personal history, which seems to be analogous to her national history, thus offering implicit commentary on the Samaritan people as a whole. The woman emerged as a representative of her people in 4:7-15 and clearly speaks for the Samaritans in 4:20-26; therefore, the comments about her personal life in 4:16-18 probably have some representative significance as well. Moreover, an allusion to the biblical account of Samaritan origins would fit well with references to Samaritan ancestors elsewhere in this chapter (4:5-6, 12) and with the evangelist’s method in other texts (e.g., 1:43-51).

The movement of the story also suggests that Jesus’ statements about the woman’s personal history anticipate the Samaritans’ acclamation of Jesus as savior. The movement toward recognition of Jesus’ identity began with the woman but was completed by the townspeople. When Jesus revealed his knowledge of the woman’s personal life she identified him as a prophet (4:19). Later, she said that her people expected the Christ to tell them “all things” (ἅπαντα), announced that Jesus had told her “all things” (πάντα) about herself, and wondered if he could be the Christ (4:25, 29).²⁷ When the people of Sychar heard this, they put the pieces together, recognizing that what Jesus said about the woman as an *individual* fulfilled and surpassed their *national* hopes. Jesus’ comments about the

²⁶ A. D. Nock observed that “the application of the title *soter* to Jesus is not in origin connected with non-Jewish religious use of the word. At the same time, converts from the Gentile world must have felt in the term something opposed to other appropriations of it” (“Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background,” in *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation by Members of the Anglican Communion* (ed. A. E. J. Rawlinson; London: Longman, Green, 1933) 93.

²⁷ On the significance of declaring “all things,” see O’Day, *Revelation*, 76; W. C. van Unnik, “A Greek characteristic of prophecy in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Text and Interpretation: Studies in the New Testament Presented to Matthew Black* (ed. E. Best and R. McL. Wilson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 211-13.

woman's life prepare for the declaration that he is "Savior of the world" and may help to illuminate the significance of that title.

Interpreters have often suggested that the reference to the woman's five husbands recalls the various deities worshiped in Samaria, but a more viable interpretation is that the comment about the husbands may have evoked memories about the nations who colonized Samaria. 2 Kings 17 mentions five nations but seven deities, and Josephus also associated the number five primarily with the nations who settled in Samaria. He said, "each of their tribes—there were five—brought along its own god" (*Ant.* 9.14.3 §288). Memories of Samaria's colonial past created issues that persisted into the first century. Josephus charged that the Samaritans claimed descent from Joseph only when their Jewish neighbors were prospering, but declared that they were of foreign descent when the Jews were in trouble. Josephus, like other Jews, called the Samaritans "Cuthians;" a derogatory appellation which recalled that the Samaritans had descended from foreign colonists brought in from Cuthah (*Ant.* 9.14.3 §288; 2 Kgs 17:24).²⁸ Rabbinic sources continued to call the Samaritans "Cuthians" as a disparaging reminder of their origins and ambivalent status under Jewish law.²⁹

If the reference to the woman's five former husbands recalls Samaria's colonial past, then "the one whom you have *now*" might refer to the current colonial power—Rome—not to the God of Israel, as many interpreters have suggested.³⁰ The woman's sixth relationship continued a pattern that had begun much earlier, yet it differed from previous relationships in that it was not really a marriage. Similarly, the pattern of colonization and the introduction of foreign deities, which had begun with the Assyrians, was continued by Herod the Great, who transformed the capital of Samaria into a Greco-Roman city named Sebaste, the Greek name for Augustus. Foreign colonists were settled in Sebaste—six thousand of them according to Josephus (*J.W.* 1.21.1 §403)—and the imperial cult was introduced.³¹ According to Josephus, the city's temple to Augustus "in size and beauty was among the most renown" (*Ant.* 15.8.5 §298; *J.W.* 1.21.1 §403). The Samaritans lived together with the foreigners, but did not intermarry with the new colonists as extensively as under the Assyrians.

The use of a statement about the woman's personal life to allude to Samaria's colonial history would fit the flow of the narrative and accord with the woman's dual role as an

²⁸ *J.W.* 1.2.6 §63; *Ant.* 9.14.3 §290; 10.9.7 §184; 11.2.1 §19-20; 11.4.4 §88; 11.7.2 §302; 13.9.1 §256. On "Cuthians," see Egger, *Josephus*, 179-212. She argues that the term was used by the Samaritans themselves for the colonists brought in by the Assyrians and only later applied to the Samaritans themselves. She maintains that Josephus disparaged only the "Samaritans" of foreign ancestry, not the "Samaritans" who shared the heritage of Israel. Yet the present form of Josephus's work does not consistently distinguish the two groups and does use "Cuthians" for the community centered at Gerizim. See the review of Egger's work by R. Pummer in *JBL* 107 (1988) 768-72.

²⁹ For the use of "Cuthians" in the Mishna, see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black; Edinburgh: Clark, 1973-87) 2. 17. On textual issues related to "Cuthians" in rabbinic sources, see Egger, *Josephus*, 186-87. On Jewish attitudes toward the Samaritans generally, see J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 352-58. He states that the fundamental reason why Samaritans were excluded from Israel by Jews "was their origin and not the cult of Gerizim" (p. 356). See also Schürer, *History*, rev. Vermes et al., 2. 15-20.

³⁰ See section II and nn. 11-14 above.

³¹ Macedonian colonists had been introduced during the Hellenistic period; see Schürer, *History*, rev. Vermes et al., 2. 15-16.

individual and a national representative, while avoiding the difficulties that arise when the husbands are associated with deities. For example, Jesus' statement in 4:16 is sometimes read as a double entendre meaning both "Go call your husband" and "Go invoke your Lord,"³² but it is difficult to see how the attendant command to "come here" would involve a deity. As an allusion to her people, however, the command works well in the movement of the narrative. Toward the beginning of the story Jesus indicated that the woman should ask him for living water (4:10); she initially balked at the suggestion, but the discussion concluded when she finally did ask him for water (4:15). The next part began when Jesus told her, "Go call your husband and come here" (4:16). The woman demurred again, but this section, like the first one, concluded when she finally obeyed Jesus, by going to call her people to come to Jesus (4:29). The woman's response "I have no husband" is often taken to mean that she had no god, even though Jews charged that the Samaritans fraternized with too many gods. The statement can better be taken to mean that she had no people, since from a Jewish perspective the Samaritans at Shechem were "no nation" (Sir 50:25-26).

The Samaritans became true people of God when they came to Jesus, as Birger Olsson has rightly pointed out.³³ In this passage Christ transcended the divisions between Jews and Samaritans, incorporating the Samaritan townspeople into a new community marked by true worship of God. The story began when Jesus met a woman whose life was characterized by a sequence of relationships that were tragic at best, sinful at worst, but who began moving her beyond a preoccupation with the mundane toward a grasp of a more profound truth. Analogously, the Samaritans had a history of being dominated by a sequence of colonial powers, but they finally came to acknowledge the higher sovereignty of God in the person of Jesus, transferring to Jesus a title used by the head of the current ruling power.

Establishing a connection between the woman's husbands and the title "Savior of the world" is not decisive for the interpretation of the passage. The imperial connotations in 4:39-42 seem clear even if the woman's life story is not understood as a reminder of the Samaritan colonial experience. What we have attempted to do is to identify ways in which earlier sections of the narrative anticipate the conclusion, as the references to "Israelite" and "guile" in 1:47 prepare for the allusion to Jacob's ladder in 1:51, and a passing reference to "night" in 3:2 gains added significance when connected with images of darkness later in the chapter (3:19-21). We lose sight of the text if we view the woman merely as a cipher for spiritual realities, but we also overlook important dimensions of the text if we ignore the woman's representative role, which is signaled by the first and second person plurals.

In any event, the Samaritans' use of the title "Savior of the world" for Jesus is an important element in the theme of Jesus' kingship, which the Fourth Evangelist associated with the issue of Roman sovereignty. The kingship theme is introduced in chap. 1, when Nathanael speaks as a true Israelite and prototype of Christian believers by calling Jesus "King of Israel" (1:49), and it culminates at the trial scene, when "the Jews" who reject Jesus deny that he is "the King of the Jews" (19:12, 15, 21). According to the evangelist, the Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus did so with an eye on Roman authority. Unlike the Synoptics, the Fourth Gospel explicitly says that Jesus' adversaries formulated the final

³² Olsson, *Structure*, 184.

³³ *Ibid.*, 252.

plans for his death in fear of the Romans (11:48) and later enlisted Roman cooperation to arrest Jesus (18:3, 12). At the trial before Pilate Jesus declared that his kingship was not from this world and informed Pilate that even the Roman governor was subject to the authority “from above,” that is, from God. Unwittingly, Pilate announced Jesus’ kingship to all the world by placarding his royal title above the cross in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. The implication of the trial narrative is that “the disciple will always have to decide *vis á vis* the empire whether Jesus is his king or whether Caesar is.”³⁴

“The Jews” told Pilate that if he released Jesus he was no longer Caesar’s friend, and, in a scene told with searing irony, condemned themselves at the judgment seat by announcing, “We have no king but Caesar” (19:15). The Samaritans represent the opposite position, declaring that it is Jesus—and presumably not Caesar—who *truly* bears the title “Savior of the world.” They received the “testimony” (4:39) of the anonymous woman who recognized that Jesus spoke the truth; they welcomed Jesus without trying to make him a king on worldly terms (contrast 6:15); and, unlike Pilate, they listened to Jesus, showing that they were of the truth (4:41-42; 18:37-38).

The attitudes toward Rome depicted in the Gospel probably reflect views that continued to appear in the evangelist’s own historical context. Scholars generally agree that “the Jews” or “the Pharisees,” who are portrayed as Jesus’ main adversaries in the Gospel, probably continued to be the chief opponents of the Johannine community during its formative period. David Rensberger also has pointed out that Jesus’ opponents manifest the two dominant attitudes toward Roman authority of the evangelist’s own time: collaboration and violent resistance.³⁵ In the narrative, the preparations for Jesus’ arrest and declaration that Caesar alone is king clearly show collaboration, while a tendency toward resistance appears in the call for the release of Barabbas, who was an insurrectionist (18:40). The evangelist wrote after AD 70, when the Pharisees established themselves as the dominant Jewish party through cooperation with Rome. At the same time, anti-Roman sentiments continued to appear in Pharisaic Judaism—implicitly in the petitions for the restoration of Jerusalem and the throne of David in the Eighteen Benedictions, and explicitly in R. Aqiba’s support for the Bar Kochba revolt. Similar views appear in Jewish apocalyptic writings (e.g., 4 Ezra 11–13; 2 Baruch 39–42; Sib. Or. 5:162-178).

During this period the Johannine community probably came to include at least some Samaritan members.³⁶ The Fourth Gospel is the only one to recount the conversion of a Samaritan village, and Jesus’ comment about the Samaritan fields “white for harvest” seems to anticipate a Christian mission in Samaria (4:35). Later, Jesus was accused of being a Samaritan and did not deny the charge (8:48). Pressures to engage in collaboration or resistance would have been familiar to Samaritan Christians. The dominant city of the region was Sebaste, which was named for Caesar Augustus and contained a large temple honoring him (*J.W.* 1.21.1 §403). The inhabitants of the city were primarily foreign colonists, and troops from Sebaste remained loyal to Rome during the disturbances after

³⁴ Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 64. D. Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 98. F. Vouga suggested that the Johannine community was the victim of imperial persecution (*La cadre historique et l'intention théologique de Jean* [Paris: Beauchesne, 1977] 108-10). The connections between John's Gospel and Domitian's persecutions are not clear, however.

³⁵ Rensberger, *Johannine Faith*, 87-90.

³⁶ E.g., Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 318; O. Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle: Its Place in Judaism, Among the Disciples of Jesus, and in Early Christianity* (London: SCM, 1975) 37-38, 46-51; R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 36-40.

Herod the Great's death (*J.W.* 2.3.4 §52) and probably during the first Jewish revolt as well. The local Samaritan population was more restive, and in AD 35–36 a messianic pretender attracted a large following of Samaritans who were “refugees from the persecution of Pilate.” The group was massacred at Pilate’s directive, but the Samaritan council appealed to the governor in Syria, securing Pilate’s recall to Rome (*Ant.* 18.4.1–2 §85–89). Later, in July of AD 67, Samaritan rebels assembled at Gerizim, where they were defeated by Vespasian (*J.W.* 3.7.32 §307–15). A new Roman city, Flavia Neapolis, was founded at the foot of Mt. Gerizim in about AD 72, solidifying Roman control over the region ³⁷

The Roman presence in Samaria would have been well known to Samaritan members of the Johannine community, those who engaged in the missionary activity envisioned by John 4:35–38, and perhaps even to those without direct knowledge of the region. Samaria’s main cities were Sebaste and later Flavia Neapolis, whose names proclaimed Roman domination. Josephus spoke of the “renown” of Sebaste’s temple to Augustus (*Ant.* 15.8.5 §298); Strabo mentioned only Sebaste among the cities of Samaria (*Geog.* 16.2.34); and Pliny the Elder identified Mt. Gerizim (*mons Argazin*), Sebaste, and Neapolis as the main features of the region (*Hist.* 5.14.68–69). The evangelist informed readers about lesser-known features of the area, like the location of Jacob’s well, but a better-known feature like Mt. Gerizim is never named; it is simply called “this mountain” in a context that correctly assumes that it could be seen from the well (4:20–21). Readers able to identify Gerizim as “this mountain” would almost certainly have known about the pervasive Roman presence in the region.

Rensberger discerned the Fourth Evangelist’s stance toward Roman authority primarily through investigation of the trial narrative, but his conclusions serve as an apt description of the Samaritan response to Jesus. Rensberger stated that the Fourth Evangelist addressed the issue of Israel’s freedom in the late first-century Roman empire by presenting an alternative to both collaboration and violent resistance. The evangelist called for “adherence to the king who is not of this world, whose servants do not fight but remain in the world bearing witness to the truth before the rulers of both synagogue and Empire” Against the claims of Caesar the evangelist affirms the sovereignty of God; against the zealots he insists that God’s sovereignty is not won by violence. “What is involved is first of all a revolution of consciousness, the alienation of their allegiance away from the idolatrous and oppressive orders of the world toward the truth of God, the truth that makes free.”³⁸ The Samaritans exemplify this position, by moving beyond a form of worship tainted by charges of idolatry to true worship of God, and beyond a national identity defined by colonial powers to become true people of God. The title “Savior of the world” was used by Caesar, but the Samaritans recognized that it truly belonged to Jesus, whom they received in a manner appropriate for a king.

³⁷ On Sebaste and Neapolis, see Schürer, *History*, rev. Vermes et al., 1. 520, 2. 162–64; G. W. van Beek, “Samaria,” *IDB* 4. 182–88, esp. 186. On the archaeological remains of the temple to Augustus see G. A. Reisner, C. S. Fisher, and D. G. Lyon, *Harvard Excavations at Samaria 1908–1910* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924) 1. 47–50, 170–80; J. W. Crowfoot, K. M. Kenyon, *The Buildings at Samaria* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1942) 126–27, 138.

³⁸ Rensberger, *Johannine Faith*, 100, 117.