

Saint Teresa “Reads” the Woman at the Well
Alison Weber

Teresa of Jesus loved her church—there is no doubt about that—as the mediator of the sacraments and as the most powerful symbol of the universal salvation offered in Christ. But she was by no means blind to the need for reform. Although she anticipated the Tridentine decrees mandating active and passive enclosure, enclosure in and of itself does not constitute the essence of Teresian reform. It meant more than making sure that the bars of the locutory grille were such that “no hand can pass through” (Teresian Constitutions). Teresian reform in its broadest and most profound sense meant creating spaces and making room in the church for more men and women to have the Samaritan woman’s experience.

What was the Samaritan woman’s experience as Teresa understood it, remembered it, and as she reconstructed it after she was forbidden to read Scripture in the vernacular?¹ Let us see how Teresa weaves her reflection on the woman at the well into another work—her reflections on a few verses of *The Song of Songs*. Here, her point of departure is the verse “Sustain me with flowers and surround me with apples, for I am dying of love (SG. 2:5). Teresa writes:

I recall now what I have often thought concerning that holy Samaritan woman, for she must have been wounded by this herb. How well she must have taken into her heart the words of the Lord, since she left the Lord for the gain and profit of the people of her village. This explains well what I am saying. And in payment for her great charity, she merited to be believed and to see the wonderful good our Lord did in that village.

It seems to me that one of the greatest consolations a person can have on earth must be to see other souls helped through his own efforts. Then, it seems to me, one eats the delicious fruit of these flowers. Happy are those to whom the Lord grants these favors. These souls are indeed obligated to serve Him. This holy woman, in that divine intoxication, went shouting through the streets. What amazes me is to see how the people believed her—a woman. And she must not have been well-off since she went to draw water. Indeed she was very humble because when the Lord told her faults to her she didn’t become offended (as the world does now, for the truth is hard to bear), but she told Him that He must be a

¹ The question of the extent to which Teresa read Scripture is unresolved. Beginning around 1492, the Catholic monarchs, fearing that Bible reading would encourage recent converts to revert to Judaism, issued several decrees prohibiting the possession and use of vernacular translations. The appropriateness of vernacular translations was also debated at the Council of Trent, but the issue was left unresolved. However, the Spanish Inquisition unilaterally banned vernacular translations of Scripture with its 1551 Index. The 1559 Spanish Index also banned numerous devotional works that often included passages of Scripture. Nevertheless, analyses of booksellers’ inventories reveal that these prohibitions were not entirely effective. Teresa obviously had read works such as *The Life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony, which contained extended Scriptural passages. We must remember as well that Teresa lived in an oral/aural culture, and she may well have assimilated Scriptural passages from sermons and the recitation of the Daily Office. For more on this topic, see Slade, 1995.

prophet. In sum, the people believed her; and a large crowd, on her word alone, went out of the city to meet the Lord.

So I say that much good is done by those who, after speaking with His Majesty for several years, when receiving His gifts and delights, want to serve in laborious ways even though these delights and consolations are thereby hindered. I say that the fragrance of these flowers and works produced and flowing from the tree of such fervent love lasts much longer.²

We see that Teresa remembered that the Samaritan was able to have an extended, private conversation with Jesus, even though she was a woman, a Samaritan, and something of a pariah. Teresa probably realized that for Jesus, a rabbi, to speak to an unknown woman in public would have raised eyebrows. Indeed, the disciples were shocked speechless when they returned to the well: “And upon this came his disciples, and marveled that he talked with the woman: yet no man said, What seekest thou? Or, Why talkest thou with her?” (John 4:27). Teresa may well have known the verses that reveal that the Jews looked down on the Samaritans and considered them unclean.³ In John 4: 9 when Jesus asks the woman for a drink, she answers, “How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria, for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans?” Teresa, as a *conversa*, may have been especially moved to realize that Jesus was unconstrained by prejudices against the “unclean” Samaritans. In fact, he took the Samaritan woman *seriously*, even though He knew that she was a woman of ill repute, who was living with a man who was not her husband. He deemed her worthy of being taught and capable of *understanding* his lessons: the difference between the dead letter (water in a well) and the spirit (the water of eternal life), and the pointlessness of sectarian hatred (the dispute between the Jews and Samaritans over whether God should be worshiped on Mount Gerizim in Samaria or in the Jerusalem temple). This pariah of a pariah tribe was worthy of hearing the stunning news that Jesus was the Messiah!

Teresa is even more amazed that the Samaritan woman was able to leave “the Lord for the gain and profit of the people of her village.” She turned her private conversation with Jesus into works: “How well she must have taken into her heart the words of the Lord!” Teresa remarks. She imagines the Samaritan woman, “in divine intoxication,” shouting the good news in the street. What risky behavior, shouting as if she were drunk! Not unlike the risks Teresa took in writing her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*! Someone might ask, “Has this Carmelite got her hands on a vernacular translation of the Bible, against the decrees of the Index of Prohibited Books? How does she presume to lecture, preach, or explicate Scripture?” (And indeed, in 1580, one of Teresa’s confessors ordered her to burn her manuscript of the *Meditations*. Fortunately, copies that her nuns had made survived.)⁴

² *Meditations on the Song of Songs* cap. 7:6-7. I cite from the translation of Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* (Washington, D.C. ICS: 1980): vol. 2, pp. 258-259.

³ In Israel today the few hundred remaining Samaritans live apart from other Jews (Murphy, 136).

⁴ This commentary was written between 1566 and 1571. Although Domingo Báñez signed the manuscript to indicate his approval in 1575, in 1580 Diego de Yanguas, another confessor and theologian of the Inquisition, ordered her to burn all copies. Several copies made by her nuns survived. Fray Luis de León, who had spent nearly five years in an Inquisitorial jail for translating the Song of Songs into Castilian, did not include the *Meditations* in his 1588 edition of Teresa’s works. See Slade, p. 50

Teresa continues, "What amazes me is to see how the people believed her—a woman...The people believed her; and a large crowd, on her world alone, went out of the city to meet the Lord." Teresa obviously admires the Samaritan woman but she also envies her, in a sense, because she, like the other New Testament women who were an integral part of Jesus's circle, so immediately and resolutely fulfilled an apostolic mission.⁵ This is what reform meant for Teresa—not raising the convent walls and putting more bars in the locutory. It meant turning the flowers of interior prayer into the fruits of works. This is what she wanted for herself and for other Christians, men and women: the opportunity to have a private conversation with the Lord, which is, after all, how she thought of interior prayer; the opportunity to be assured that they were worthy of this conversation, regardless of sex, caste, and social standing; the chance to turn that intoxicating conversation into works; the opportunity to draw souls "out of the city to meet the Lord."

Suggested readings:

Allen, Prudence. "Soul, Body and Transcendence in Teresa of Avila." *Toronto Journal of Theology* 3 (1987): 252-266.

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Dobhan, Ulrich. "Teresa de Jesús y la emancipación de la mujer." In *Actas del Congreso Internacional Teresiano 4-7 octubre, 1982*, edited by Teófanos Egido Martínez, et al., 1: 121-136. Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1983.

Luti, Janice Mary. *Teresa of Avila's Way*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991.

Murphy, Cullen. *The Word According to Eve*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Slade, Carole. "Saint Teresa's *Meditaciones sobre los cantares*: The Hermeneutics of Humility and Enjoyment." *Religion and Literature* 18 (1986): 27-44.

———. *St. Teresa of Avila: Author of a Heroic Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

———. "St. Teresa of Avila as a Social Reformer." In *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, edited by Janet K. Ruffing, 91-103. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

⁵ We remember that *apostolos* in Greek means messenger or envoy.