


'[Y]ou have had five husbands': Interpreting the Samaritan woman's marital experience (Jn 4:16–18) in the Nigerian context

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The Samaritan woman in John 4 has been generally viewed as morally loose because of her marital experience. Nigerian women with similar experience are also perceived by many as morally deficient. This article examined the woman's experience in light of divorce and remarriage in Nigeria. Employing the reader-oriented and descriptive methods, the essay found that in his encounter with the Samaritan woman Jesus did not accuse her of any sin. Moreover, the Pentateuchal laws, which were binding also on Samaritans, had provisions by which it was permissible for a woman to be married several times. Therefore, the woman's marital experience did not necessarily make her morally deficient. The article also found that in Nigeria certain patriarchal factors do force women out of marriage, which also has nothing to do with their moral status. Due to the Christian doctrine that prohibits a woman to marry another man while her husband is still alive, some churches treat women divorcees with contempt and segregation. But this doctrine is based on biblical passages, which if adapted to the Nigerian readers' context make divorce and remarriage acceptable. This view is in line with Jesus' open attitude to the Samaritan woman. Therefore, in the Nigerian context the pastoral significance of the Samaritan woman's story resides not in her morality but in the church recognising that divorce and remarriage do not constitute disobedience to scripture, and that they are not necessarily an indication of moral misconduct on the part of the affected women.

Contribution: Contributing to the scholarly discussion on the Samaritan woman narrative, the article compared her marital experience with those of Nigerian women affected by divorce and remarriage, and postulated that their experiences are not necessarily an indication of moral depravity on their part.

Keywords: the Samaritan woman; Jewish marital laws; divorce and remarriage; women abuse; Nigerian Christian women.

Introduction

On his journey through the Samaritan town of Sychar, Jesus sits by a well. A Samaritan woman comes to fetch water, and Jesus asks her for some water to drink. The woman is surprised that Jesus, a Jew, could ask for water from a Samaritan because 'Jews have no dealings with Samaritans' (Jn 4:9, Revised Standard Version [RSV]).² Speaking figuratively, Jesus declares to the woman that he can give her a kind of water that one drinks and does not thirst anymore. Taking Jesus' words literally, the woman desires to have this type of water (vv. 10–15). Jesus tells her to go and call her husband, but she answers that she has none. Jesus affirms that the woman has told the truth because she has had five husbands, and even the man she stays with currently is not her husband (vv. 16–18). In view of the fact that the Samaritan woman is depicted to have been married five times and living with a sixth man, the popular reading of the narrative is that the woman is 'disreputable, probably promiscuous, and perhaps a prostitute' (Sim 2015:5). This perception about her moral conduct has generally influenced the history of interpretation of the text. For instance, in the 3rd century CE, Tertullian described the Samaritan woman as a prostitute, while a century later John Chrysostom saw her as 'guilty of wicked, shameful sin'. About a millennium later, John Calvin derided the woman 'as an adulterer who forced her husband to divorce her' (Reeder 2022:3). Down to the present time, the view that the woman of Samaria was

1. The English Bible versions quoted in this work are abbreviated as follows: English Standard Version (ESV); King James Version (KJV); New King James Version (NKJV); Revised Standard Version (RSV); Today's English Version (TEV).

2. Thus, the narrative refers to the enmity that had existed between Jews and Samaritans since the capture of Samaria by the Assyrians in the 8th century BCE. Subsequent to the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722/721, Sargon II deported leading Israelites to other parts of his empire and settled five foreign nations in Samaria (Okure 2009:407; cf. 2 Ki 17).

guilty of immoral behaviour continues to be held by many interpreters. In Wright's (2002:45) interpretation, the woman's life was composed of emotional upheavals, as husbands kept coming and going. Her various marriages must have ended in divorce rather than the death of the men involved. Lincoln (2005:175) asserts that 'anyone in the woman's situation would be bound to have been viewed as morally suspect'.

In Nigeria, the Samaritan woman's experience resonates with those of women who have married more than once, divorced women, and those not officially divorced but separated from their husbands. Like the woman of Samaria, such women are often 'looked upon as ... loose' women or prostitutes (Cohen 1961:1234). It is interesting to note that this perception seldom applies to men who marry several times. Therefore, this article examines the Samaritan woman's experience in light of divorce, separation and remarriage in Nigeria, particularly among Christian women. Specifically, the essay assesses the correctness or otherwise of the perception that marrying several times amounts to moral deficiency on the part of the affected women. The article also appraises the situation of such women as a challenge to the church in Nigeria. The work adopts a narrative reading for the study of John 4. According to Oosthuizen (1994:85), narrative analysis does not question the historical truth of a text but treats it in its story form, inviting 'the reader to explore the dimensions of the narrative in its final form'. A corollary of narrative reading is the 'reader response' approach which appraises the impact of the text on the reader (Cranford 2002:159). For the discussion of divorce and remarriage in Nigeria, the article employs the descriptive method which simply means to 'describe a phenomenon and its characteristics' (Nassaji 2015:130). In an exegesis, the article begins with an examination of the Samaritan woman's marital experience. Thereafter, it examines the woman's experience in the Nigerian context. Finally, the essay appraises the implications of the study for the church in Nigeria.

The Samaritan woman's marital experience: An exegesis of John 4:16–18

In John 4:10–15, Jesus introduces the Samaritan woman to that ever-satisfying water, and she is eager to have it. But suddenly in verse 16, Jesus tells the woman to 'Go, call your husband and come here' (RSV), thus abruptly changing 'the direction of the conversation' (Sim 2015:20). To explain the abrupt change in the subject of discussion, it is popularly suggested that here 'Jesus' telepathic ability' was at work by which he revealed to the woman everything she had ever done (Warren 2021:57; cf. vv. 17–19, 39). As expressed by Guthrie (1994:1034), Jesus' response in verse 18 affirming that the woman has had five husbands shows that he 'was displaying that greater insight which ... the woman herself began to recognize' in verse 19. Following this line of thought, Dodd (1953:313) opines that in verse 16, Jesus deliberately

changed the direction of the conversation to disclose to the woman the sinful life she was living, in order to save her from it. The problem with this view, however, is that in the whole of the chapter Jesus does not discuss with the woman issues relating 'to repentance, forgiveness, or faith' (Sim 2015:20). Jesus did not tell her to 'Go and sin no more' as he told the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:11), for example. It is more plausible to suggest that Jesus changed the direction of the conversation in order to involve the man to whom the woman would ordinarily have been subject. 'Culturally, he would not engage in a transformational teaching and experience by dealing with her outside her network of social obligations' (Sim 2015:20). Thus, at the point where the woman asked for the living water, Jesus would not go further with her without seeing 'the man to whom she was subject' (Sim 2015:20; cf. Ridderbos 1997:158). In other words:

Rather than drawing out her sinful life so that sin might be forgiven, Jesus raises the question of the man in her life so that he will not continue telling her a message that has transforming potential without reference to whatever man she is subject to. (Sim 2015:21)

In verses 17–18, Jesus affirms the woman's response that she has no husband, for she has had five previously, and her present man is not really her husband. The popular view that the Samaritan woman was morally deficient is based on her marital status as depicted in these verses. For being married five times contrary to the Rabbinic laws which allowed marriage not more than three times, critics conclude that the woman 'leads a loose moral life' (Okure 2009:407). The text does not give any clues about how the five marriages ended but some assume divorce, 'the insatiable woman flitting from one relationship to another' (Warren 2021:60). As already mentioned, Wright (2002:45) similarly opines that the woman's marriages ended in divorce, most likely caused by her. It is suggested that she must have been generally 'viewed as morally suspect' (Lincoln 2005:175), therefore 'the rest of the women of Sychar did not like her' (Keener 1993:272). This would explain why the Samaritan woman came to the well alone, and not in the company of other women (Keener 1993:272). Some even suggest that the woman had been ostracised by other women so much that when she returned to the village (v. 28), it was only the men she addressed (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:99; Neyrey 1994:83). This view must have derived from the fact that a few English versions (e.g. King James Version [KJV] & New King James Version [NKJV]) render *ανθρωποι* as 'men'. But *ανθρωποι* has two senses, namely, 'men' and 'people', and in the context of verse 28 'people' would be more appropriate, suggesting a 'more probable mixed gender' of the woman's audience (Sim 2015:7). The text would have read *ανηρ* if 'men' was strictly intended. This view is buttressed by the fact that several English versions translate *ανθρωποι* as [people] (e.g. RSV, English Standard Version [ESV], Today's English Version [TEV]). Translating *ανθρωποι* as [men] also does not take cognisance of verse 39, where later 'many Samaritans from that city believed' in Jesus on account of the woman's testimony (RSV). There is nothing to suggest in the text that

'many Samaritans' refers only to men. Therefore, as Sim (2015:5–7) rightly observes, it cannot be concluded from the text that the Samaritan woman had an all-male audience in verse 28. Instead, one would agree with Warren (2021:63) that in this verse 'the woman [...] speaks to her community'.

Nonetheless, some interpreters find support for the claim of a loose moral conduct on the part of the Samaritan woman in her statement that Jesus told 'me all that I ever did' (vv. 29, 39, RSV). In other words, the statement implies 'her complicity in sexual relationships' (Sim 2015:20). However, scholars are reading into the text more than is intended if 'all I ever did' is interpreted to refer to her 'sexual history' (Sim 2015:20). As earlier mentioned, 'the text imputes neither sin nor shame to the woman' because Jesus does not talk about sin or repentance throughout the narrative (D'Angelo 1999:134). Moreover, the attitude of the Samaritans towards the woman in verse 39 does not reflect the claim of a loose moral life. Rather:

[T]he fact that the woman's testimony is believed *in her own community*, where presumably her domestic life would be widely known, suggests that ... the Samaritans in the story seem largely unbothered by the woman's life, at least unbothered enough for the woman to feel empowered to speak freely to her community about her encounter, and unbothered enough to take her seriously. (Warren 2021:63)

It is also not valid to conclude that the woman was being isolated by other women, for which reason she came to fetch water alone. To buttress this point, Sim (2015:7) makes reference to the instances when Rebekah (Gn 24:11–16) and Rachel (Gn 29) went to the well alone. Moreover, the discussion of the woman's moral life has always ignored her likely social status, which is not disclosed in the text. If she was a servant or slave, the question of not appearing in the company of other women does not arise at all. In other words, the situation is radically altered if she was a servant, and fetching water was a servant's task (Sim 2015:7).

More importantly, the popular perception that the Samaritan woman led an immoral life on account of her marital experience seems to lose sight of Jewish marital laws, which likewise must have been binding on Samaritans, as 'both communities draw their prescriptions from their respective versions of the Pentateuch' (Sim 2015:15). As mentioned above, these laws allowed 'multiple marriages or divorces (but not more than) two or possibly three' (Sim 2015:15; cf. Okure 2009:407). Particularly significant in this regard is the custom of levirate marriage which provides that when a man dies without a son, his widow shall not marry outside the family but his brother shall marry her in order to sire a male child for the deceased so that the dead brother's name will not be forgotten (Dt 25:5–6). The five husbands could be understood in this context, the woman simply being a widow trapped in the levirate regulations (O'Day 2012:521; Okure 2009:408). Within this law, being married to five husbands would have been 'entirely possible' if the woman was widowed at about the age of 40 (Sim 2015:15). Also, within the context of levirate, it is possible that the sixth man was

one who cared for her but 'unable or unwilling to marry her' (Spencer 2004:91).

Moreover, contrary to the speculation that the woman might be guilty of divorcing her husbands, she might actually have been a victim of the patriarchal view of women as shown in the Mosaic laws. In these laws, for instance, 'a woman was the property of her father or her husband' (Fox 2002:23), so a man's wife is listed along with his other belongings (Ex 20:17). To this end, Collins (1972:798) asserts that in Israelite customs women could 'be owned like cattle'. Deuteronomy 22:13–21 indicates that the husband 'controls terms of marriage (and) his wife's sexuality' (Kirk-Dugan 2012:274), while in Deuteronomy 24:1 'only the husband has the right to initiate divorce' (Ademiluka 2018:345). Originally, the reason for which a man could divorce his wife in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 was adultery but in later Jewish traditions, the Hillel school of thought held that a man could divorce his wife for any reason (Adams 1980:51; Edgar 1990:171; Keener 1993:96). Divorce, therefore, does not necessarily reflect on the wife's moral behaviour (Gower 1987:70; Seim 1987:68), which implies that the Samaritan woman might have had 'as many as five men in her life without being of ill-repute' (Sim 2015:19).

This section has demonstrated that it is not hermeneutically correct to conclude that the Samaritan woman was morally loose on account of her marital experience because several social factors could be responsible for divorce and remarriage in her cultural context. Sim's (2015:19) summary is very apt here, that:

Rather than a woman who is morally questionable, we have a woman who has had a harsh experience of life – most probably widowed more than once, remarried to a brother of her late husband(s), now living, cared for, or protected, by her own brother (or) son. Probably poor, perhaps a bonded servant or slave.

The popular perception about the woman of Samaria is found also in Nigeria in that women of similar experience are sometimes 'looked upon as' sexually loose or as prostitutes (Cohen 1961:1234). Therefore, the section below examines the Samaritan woman's experience in light of divorce or separation and remarriage as they affect Nigerian women.

The Samaritan woman in the context of divorce or separation and remarriage in Nigeria

The purpose of this section is not to deny the fact that sometimes Nigerian women are out of marriage due to moral latitude on their part. Rather, it is to point out that in Nigeria, similar to the experience of the Samaritan woman, certain patriarchal factors are capable of forcing women out of marriage, or to make a woman to marry several times. To start with, it is important to note that in Africa marriage is considered as a duty for everyone. Under normal conditions, every normal person has the obligation to get married (Mbiti

1969:104). Among most ethnic groups in Nigeria, it is culturally unacceptable for persons of age, particularly women, not to be married (Ntoimo 2012:1). In Africa, the main purpose of marriage is the issue of childbearing. Mbiti (1969:132) states that in Africa 'the supreme purpose of marriage is to bear children to build a family' (cf. Kyalo 2012:214). Nonetheless, the connection between marriage and childbearing is most significant for the African woman. This is because in Africa, 'a woman's glory is her children, and to have children, she must have a husband' (Ntoimo 2012:1). Baloyi (2017:2) recognises that in African thought a woman derives 'her social status and indispensable value' from her position as a married woman and mother.

The average Nigerian woman does not only aspire to marry, but also desires to keep her marriage, particularly for the sake of her children. As part of the induction for marriage, young women are taught by their parents to endure whatever hardship they encounter in marriage for the sake of their children (Bammeke & Eshiet 2018:7). In the patrilineal African culture, women bear children for their husbands, as 'it is through the father that a child acquires a social identity and is incorporated into the social order' (Gupta et al. 2004:8). In other words, a child belongs to his father and his lineage, consequently most women are reluctant to divorce because 'they will have to leave their children behind' (Koster 2003:82). This is one of the effects of bride price in Africa, by virtue of which 'the husband and his extended family are the rightful owners' of the products of a marriage (Scheidler 2010:4). Moreover, among many ethnic groups in Nigeria, a woman who desires to divorce will have 'to give back the bridewealth' (Koster 2003:82). For instance, among the Igbo, bride price has to be returned in the event of divorce 'as an indication of the proper dissolution of the marriage' (Diala 2014:22).

Another reason why most Nigerian married women do not want to divorce is that unlike men, a divorced woman finds it difficult 'to find a new partner' (Lazarus et al. 2017:361). In a study by Lazarus et al. (2017:361), just like some accuse the Samaritan woman of being the one divorcing her husbands, many participants agreed that the wives were to blame in most cases of divorce. Therefore, most families would not want their son to marry a divorcee where there are many 'better behaved and more appropriate potential wives' (Lazarus et al. 2017:362). Remarriage is particularly difficult for Christian women in view of the popular doctrine that 'a divorced woman cannot get married' while her husband is still alive, otherwise she is looked upon as an adulteress (Adeniran 2015:21; cf. Rm 7:2-3; 1 Cor 7:39). As will be seen in the next section, even though many interpreters have argued vehemently against this interpretation of the cited texts, it is still one factor that makes divorce unpopular for Nigerian Christian women.

Perhaps, the strongest reason why Nigerian women want to keep their marriages is the stigmatisation that is 'often attached to women following divorce' (Lazarus et al. 2017:354). Biri (2016:228) opines that ordinarily, most African

women would want to remain in their marriages in spite of all odds in order 'to escape the social opprobrium of being labelled divorcees'. Ibrahim (2015:328) describes the stigma associated with divorce in Nigeria 'as the culturally defined [...] negative consequences [...] bestowed on divorced women by other members' of the society. It usually involves 'a loss of respect and personal dignity, a sense of guilt, of shame, of personal fault and failure' (Reisman 2001:91). In Nigeria, women divorcees are so stigmatised that sometimes family members of an affected woman are reluctant to discuss the matter in public (Iwunze-Ibiam 2019). Among the Yoruba, the stigmatisation is at its height if a divorced woman has to stay with her own parents. The Yoruba detest it so much that they have a specific word for such a woman, namely, *dalemosu*; that is, a married woman 'who returns to her natal compound for residence' (Olajubu 2003:30). A *dalemosu* is 'not respected, and is (often seen as) [...] a liability to her parents' (Koster 2003:119).

In spite of the 'stigma associated with marital separation' (Ntoimo & Akokuwebe 2014:2), studies indicate that lately 'Nigeria has witnessed a high rate of divorce' (Ajayi et al. 2021:2). Nonetheless, many attest that the rate of separation is even higher than that of divorce. For instance, in 2018, separation rates 'saw a 14% increase across the whole population' (Ajayi et al. 2021:2). In their own study, Ntoimo and Akokuwebe (2014:4) discover that 'five out of every one thousand Nigerians are divorced, and six separated'. Ajayi et al. (2021:2) attempt to attribute the increase in divorce in Nigeria to 'the greater social acceptance of divorce (resulting) from (the) relaxation of negative attitudes' towards it by the general public and, especially, among various religious denominations.

In Nigeria, various types of conflicts lead to divorce or separation, in which the partners involved play varying degrees of roles. In his study conducted among the Kanuri, Cohen (1961:1243) finds that the reasons given by Nigerian 'men and women for divorce are manifold'. They include complaints about insufficient money, too much or inadequacy of sex, infidelity, and many others. Israel (2021:67) describes such marital conflicts as arising from socio-economic factors and inability 'to meet basic needs of the family' (cf. Asa & Nkan 2017:296). In recent times, the term Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) has been coined to describe marital conflicts. It is defined as those 'acts of stalking, psychological aggression, physical violence or sexual violence – behaviors and tactics through which an intimate partner seeks to establish and maintain power over another' (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2014). Intimate Partner Violence is sometimes used interchangeably with domestic violence, which 'involves the abuse of power in intimate relationships within a household' (Kunhiyop 2008:244). Furthermore, many writers have equated IPV or domestic violence with women abuse because 'women are usually the victims, as it is rarely perpetrated by women against men' (Ademiluka 2019a:3; cf. Kirk-Dugan 2012:259; Kunhiyop 2008:244). This is not to rule out cases of marital disharmony

in which women are on the offensive (Ademiluka 2021:4). However, given the African patriarchal system, usually women are at the receiving end of domestic violence. Okorie (2003:258) opines that the African woman is 'always at the receiving ends of cultures and traditions which suppress, oppress, exploit, and abuse her' (cf. Amadi & Amadi 2014:5; Osezua & Agholor 2019:416). In Nigeria, studies have shown that a high percentage of married women are 'being verbally or physically abused by their husbands' (Delano 1998). According to Hart (2016), it is reported that in Nigeria, 25% of women 'go through ordeal of domestic violence'.

There are various forms of violence against women in Nigeria as a result of which many have had to quit their marriages. One form that is frequently occurring today is wife abandonment or desertion (Kunhiyop 2008:244), which is common among Nigerian men. It happens when, on account of some conflict, a man isolates his wife 'completely even when they still live together in the same house' (Ademiluka 2019b:864). A higher level of marriage desertion involves 'men going away from home and leaving the children and mother without any support' (Nwakwo 2008:4; cf. Osisiogu 2016:380). In such a situation, the wife and the children 'become destitute if the husband is the sole bread winner of the family' (Ademiluka 2019b:864). A recent development is what is termed 'transnational marriage abandonment' (Patel & Anitha 2016), where a 'husband travels out of the country ... and never comes back to his wife' (Hightower Lawyers 2017). Perhaps, because of the prevalence of wife abandonment, the Nigerian Family Laws list it as one of 'the factors for which application for divorce can be granted in court' (Rahmatian 1996:286).

Wife beating is another form of women abuse in Nigeria. Baloyi (2013:1) observes that among some African people, 'wife beating has become an accepted way of keeping wives under control'. In Nigeria, it 'is widely sanctioned as a form of discipline' (Aihie 2009:2). On many occasions, beating includes harmful practices like attacking with a knife, gun, acid or other deadly weapons (Antai 2011; Igbelina-Igbokwe 2013). It is, therefore, no surprise that cases of husbands beating their wives to death are commonly reported in Nigerian dailies (Ademiluka 2019a:4; Anenga 2017; Elekwa 2017).

As earlier mentioned, wives are not necessarily always passive when they are being battered by their husbands. In fact, instances of wives battering their husbands are not completely lacking. However, because of the consequences of losing their marriage, as explained above, most women endure domestic violence as much as they can. It is for these reasons that many of them are usually reluctant 'to disclose their experience of abuse' (Bammeke & Eshiet 2018:7). Some actually go through abuse, 'satisfying their husbands' demands only out of fear' (Ademiluka 2021:4). In the study carried out by Osezua and Agholor (2019:416), some women reported that 'they had sexual intimacy with their spouses out of fear'. Thus, rather than sue for divorce most Nigerian women remain in marriage in spite of abuse. In other words,

women rarely initiate divorce. Conversely, for the men divorce is itself a form of abuse they inflict on their wives. When divorced, most Nigerian women want to remarry because of the same reasons for which they aspire to remain in marriage in the first place. It is for this reason that 'in Nigeria ... many divorced people remarry' (Ajayi et al. 2021:2). Cohen (1961:1234) found that among the Kanuri it is 'deplorable and laughable' for a woman of age not to be married. 'A divorced woman ought to be looking for a husband (otherwise) she is looked upon as a loose woman or a prostitute'. In Lagos, Koster (2003:82) discovered that 'only 2% of the 652 community women interviewed were divorced and not remarried, many more of the married women now in their second or third marriage'.

Thus, like the Samaritan woman, in Nigeria divorce and remarriage affect women for varied reasons which do not necessarily include being morally loose. The section below examines the implications of this understanding of the Samaritan woman's marital experience for the church in Nigeria.

Implications for the church

As mentioned in the preceding section, one of the factors that discourage Nigerian Christian women from divorcing and remarrying is the doctrine that binds a woman only to her husband until he dies. This doctrine that marriage is a union that 'endures until death do us part' (Adesanya 2009:3) is based particularly on 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, 39. In verses 10–11, Paul commands a wife not to separate from her husband, and the husband not to divorce his wife, while in verse 39 a woman cannot marry another man until her husband dies. The traditional approach by the church and among some scholars has given these texts a literal interpretation, according to which in these verses Paul forbids divorce and makes marriage 'binding until death' (Laney 1990:44). Based on this perception, some churches treat divorcees with contempt and segregation, such that they are 'not allowed to hold certain offices' (Essien 2017). For instance, they are not permitted to 'teach Sunday school or sing in choir (or) serve in a committee (or) be remarried in the church' (Richards 1990:237). While space and the purpose of this article will not permit an in-depth discussion of this controversy, it should be pointed out that many other interpreters hold a contrary opinion about these passages. Phiri (2002:25), for example, observes that biblical passages like these can 'become a death trap' for partners in abusive relationships if they are not critically examined. According to Ademiluka (2019a:8–9), when examined in the context of the whole chapter, particularly verses 12–14, 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 allows a Christian to divorce on account of adultery and permits one deserted by his/her partner to remarry (cf. Edgar 1990:191). The traditional interpretation isolates 1 Corinthians 7:39 from verses 25–40 on betrothed persons, where it properly belongs. This approach is apparently aided by some English versions that render $\gamma\upsilon\upsilon\eta$ as 'wife'. $\Gamma\upsilon\upsilon\eta$ can mean [woman or wife], but in verse 39, in the context of verses 25–40, it refers specifically to a betrothed woman and

not 'wife'. This fact is clearly shown in verse 27 where $\gamma\upsilon\eta$ unequivocally refers to [woman] in a betrothed status. In verse 39, therefore, Paul says that an 'engaged woman is free either to consummate marriage or remain in a celibate relationship with her fiancé' (Ademiluka 2019a:9), meaning that verse 39 is irrelevant for divorce and remarriage of married persons (cf. Baumert 1996:128; Keener 1993:469). The traditional interpretation must have arisen from the erroneous generalisation of 1 Corinthians 7 'for all times and all marriages' (Ademiluka 2019a:9). Baumert (1996:27) asserts that when the *Sitz im Leben* of this text is ignored, 'which often occurs when the text is proclaimed in the liturgy', it can lead to its misapplication. Nonetheless, 1 Corinthians 7 lends itself to varied adaptation in specific contexts. This is seen in verses 12–16 concerning mixed marriages on which Paul says he has no command of the Lord (v. 12), which implies that he is in a situation without a precedent. Therefore, using his own discretion, Paul advises that a Christian need not divorce his or her non-Christian spouse who decides to remain. But if the non-Christian decides to leave, 'the Christian is at liberty to marry another person' (Ademiluka 2019a:9). Paul's approach here is apt for the Nigerian woman in the patriarchal context in which she is at the receiving end of all forms of domestic abuse. As discussed in the preceding section, Nigerian women face abuses that are not only life-threatening, but actually take lives at times. In such cases, divorce does not contradict 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 (Ademiluka 2019a:9).

This proposition is in resonance with Jesus' attitude to the woman of Samaria. The popular reading of John 4 is that the author employs the woman's story 'to warn people against continuing in sin' (Reeder 2022:5). Seen as a sexually loose person, the woman of Samaria is 'a shocking sinner (whose story exemplifies the grace of God' (Reeder 2022:5). Thus, the story presents hope for all sinners like this woman. Some see in the story an evangelistic paradigm in which Jesus transgresses all boundaries, reaching out to all classes of people including a sinful Samaritan woman (Reeder 2022:4). However, as Reeder (2022:6) rightly points out, reducing 'the woman to a sinner in need of salvation' misses the intent of the narrative. As earlier mentioned, there is not any indication that Jesus treats the woman as a sinner. Therefore, O'Day (2005:47) opines that this story 'is intended to show the reader something about Jesus, not primarily about the woman'. Therefore, the pastoral significance of the narrative resides not in 'decrying the woman's morality' (Sim 2015:21) or citing her 'to showcase Jesus's radical inclusivity' (Warren 2021:56). For the church in Nigeria, the pastoral significance is in its attitude to divorcees and remarried Christian women. The church has to inculcate in her members the fact that divorce and remarriage do not amount to disobedience to scripture; neither are they necessarily an indication of a loose moral life. Therefore, instead of contempt and segregation, affected women should be treated with love and respect like other members of the church. The church can find a place for this teaching in her regular preaching and relevant programmes.

Conclusion

In view of the fact that the Samaritan woman is depicted to have been married five times and possibly staying with a sixth man who is not her husband, the popular reading of her story is that the woman is morally loose. This position, however, is not represented in the text because, in his encounter with the woman Jesus does not accuse her of sin; neither does the attitude of the Samaritans towards her reflect the claim of a loose moral life. Moreover, the popular perception about the Samaritan woman on account of her marital experience does not take cognisance of the Pentateuchal marital laws. For instance, the woman might be a widow trapped in the levirate law by which it was mandatory for her to marry one of her late husband's brothers. If divorce was involved, only the husband had the right to initiate it. Within her cultural context, then, the Samaritan woman might have had five husbands successively without necessarily being of ill-repute. In Nigeria, the woman's marital experience is reminiscent of those of women who have married several times, divorced women, and those separated from their husbands. As in the case of the woman of Samaria, such women are often looked upon as morally deficient. But, also similar to the experience of the Samaritan woman, in Nigeria certain patriarchal factors do force women out of marriage, despite the fact that generally they desire to keep their marriages for many reasons. In the patrilineal culture, divorced women have to leave their children behind, just as they may have to refund the bride price. Usually, divorced women find it difficult to find new partners, particularly in view of the stigmatisation that is always associated with divorce. Yet, in recent times there has been a high rate of divorce in Nigeria, which, however, has been generally attributed to domestic violence in which the wives are almost always at the receiving end. Therefore many Nigerian women have been forced out of marriage, either as a result of violence or as a form of it. When divorced, most Nigerian women want to remarry because of the same reasons for which they aspire to remain in marriage. That is why there are many Nigerian women who have married several times. Nigerian Christian women are particularly affected by the problems of divorce and remarriage because of the doctrine that a woman cannot marry another man until her husband dies, the teaching which is based particularly on 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, 39. However, many interpreters hold that the traditional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 arose from the erroneous generalisation of the text for all times and all marriages. Moreover, 1 Corinthians 7 lends itself to possible adaptation to the readers' specific contexts. To this end, in Nigeria where women face life threatening abuses, it makes divorce and remarriage by Christians acceptable. This proposition resonates with Jesus' attitude to the Samaritan woman in that he did not condemn her for having had five husbands. This means that the pastoral significance of the narrative resides not in the woman's morality. In Nigeria, the significance lies with the attitude of the church to the issues of divorce and remarriage. The church should accept and inculcate in her members the fact that divorce and remarriage do not represent disobedience to scripture. Divorce and

remarriage are also not necessarily an indication that the affected women are morally bankrupt. Therefore instead of contempt and segregation, such women should be treated with love and respect like other members of the church.

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