

# Transformed by Christ and Liberation from Discrimination: Reading John 4:1–41 in Ideological Criticism

Diana Kerenhapukh Eka Putri Soedradjat

Graduate Program of UKIM, Ambon, Jln. Ot. Pattimaipauw, Maluku, Indonesia  
[dkeren917@gmail.com](mailto:dkeren917@gmail.com); [chevyhicetta@yahoo.com](mailto:chevyhicetta@yahoo.com)



## ABSTRACT

This article explores John 4:1–41 through the lens of ideological criticism to reveal its liberative potential in resisting cultural constructs that marginalize women. The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is examined as a counter-ideology that dismantles patriarchal norms of exclusion, stigma, and gender discrimination. By challenging socio-religious boundaries of ethnicity, gender, and morality, the narrative demonstrates Christ's transformative power that affirms women's dignity and agency. This study argues that the text not only exposes the oppressive ideologies embedded in its cultural setting but also offers a liberating vision where women become active bearers of faith and witnesses of truth. Such a reading invites contemporary Christian communities to embody the same transformative ethos in confronting ongoing structures of discrimination today.

### Article History

Received 2025-08-21

Accepted 2025-12-30

Published 2025-12-31

### Keywords

John 4:1–41

Ideological Criticism

Counter-Ideology

Gender Discrimination

Liberation

### How to cite this article:

Soedradjat, D. K. E. P. (2025)

'Transformed by Christ and

Liberation from Discrimination:

Reading John 4:1–41 in

Ideological Criticism', *ARUMBAE:*

*Jurnal Ilmiah Teologi dan Studi*

*Agama*, 7(2), pp. 192–200. doi:

10.37429/arumbae.v7i2.1671.



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## Introduction

The pericope of John 4:1–41 presents a remarkable instance of Christ transcending entrenched cultural prejudices by engaging in a profound conversation with a marginalized Samaritan woman. In doing so, the narrative confronts oppressive cultural constructs related to gender, ethnicity, and morality. This introduction situates the analysis within the framework of ideological criticism, scrutinizing how the text subverts dominant ideologies that systematically silence and devalue women—especially those deemed socially unacceptable (Yeo 1995, 73).

At the outset, the Samaritan woman is characterized as a marginalized figure: a foreigner, a woman with a questionable marital history, and someone who approaches the well at noon—deviating from social norms—which implies her exclusion from society (O'Day 1992, 571). These details invoke a cultural script of shame and dishonor, making her an ideal subject for ideological critique (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 113).

The methodology of ideological criticism focuses on exposing both the dominant ideologies embedded in a text and the muted or counter-ideologies it contains (Osiek 1997, 41). Applying this lens to John 4 enables us to perceive the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus as a counter-ideology reclaiming her agency—one that resists patriarchal and ethnic prejudices. Such a reading uncovers how the encounter challenges the ideological status quo (Segovia 1995, 58).

Jesus' actions within the narrative actively dismantle cultural norms. By initiating a public theological conversation with the Samaritan woman and revealing his identity as Messiah—"I am he" (John 4:26)—He breaks gender taboos and opens paths for female agency and witness (Brown 1966, 170; Schneiders 1991, 52). The woman's role transitions from outsider to insider and finally to missionary within her community, illustrating Christ's liberative transformation (Moloney 1998, 132).

This transformation aligns with liberation theology's emphasis on divine intervention subverting oppressive societal structures (Gutierrez 1988, 32). In the Samaritan woman's narrative, the "living water" symbolizes spiritual liberation that both affirms her dignity and empowers her as a communicator of the gospel (Koester 2003, 91). The pericope thus emerges as a microcosmic resistance against cultural discrimination (Painter 1991, 146).

This study therefore argues that John 4:1–41 functions as a counter-ideology to dominant cultural constructs that marginalize women. Through an ideological-critical reading, the encounter becomes a theological locus of transformation—one in which Christ dismantles oppressive norms, affirms marginalized identities, and establishes women as vital witnesses. Such insights invite contemporary dialogues on gender, power, and liberation within Christian communities (Schneiders 1999, 239).

## Research Method

The research begins with an exploration of the origins of the social position of women and men within the cultural and theological framework of the Old Testament. This preliminary step is essential for uncovering how ancient gender roles shaped societal perceptions of women and children, particularly regarding authority, family structures, and community belonging. By situating the interpretation within this historical and cultural context, the study highlights the deeply rooted ideologies that shaped both the marginalization and the valuation of women in biblical traditions.

Building on this foundation, the study employs a literature-based approach combined with ideological criticism to interpret John 4:1–41. Through an integrated use of intrinsic and extrinsic analysis, the text is examined not only for its narrative and rhetorical features but also for the socio-cultural dynamics it reflects. This dual analysis enables the identification of dominant ideologies underlying the discrimination against women and children, exposing the ways in which these ideologies perpetuate exclusion and silencing within both ancient and contemporary contexts.

The final step of the method involves reconstructing a counter-ideology that emerges from within the text as a liberative alternative to oppressive cultural constructs. By highlighting the transformative role of Christ in affirming women's dignity and agency, the research seeks to articulate a theological vision that challenges patriarchal readings of Scripture. This reconstructed perspective is then related to contemporary contexts, offering an interpretive framework that not only critiques historical injustice but also empowers present-day Christian communities to resist ongoing structures of discrimination.

## Results and Discussion

### *Theological Characteristics of the Gospel of John*

Before engaging the specific text of John 4:1–41, it is necessary to consider the broader theological contours of the Gospel of John. A careful understanding of its background, literary form, and theological emphases provides a crucial framework for interpreting the Samaritan woman narrative. The Gospel of John stands apart from the Synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and

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Luke—not merely in structure and style, but in its distinctive theological vision. Its symbolic narrative form, dialogues, and dualistic contrasts underscore a Christology that is both cosmic and incarnational (Barrett 1978, 21-23).

The historical backdrop of John's Gospel reflects deep tensions between Judaism and surrounding cultures. The estrangement between Jews and Samaritans, for instance, reaches back to the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE, which led to intermarriage between Israelites and foreigners, thereby producing the Samaritan identity. For Jewish orthodoxy, this "loss of racial purity" represented an intolerable violation of covenantal fidelity (Brown 1966, 170-72). John's Gospel reflects this complex heritage: while deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, it was written at a time when Judaism itself was undergoing a transitional phase under Hellenistic and Roman influences (Koester 2003, 43-45).

From a literary standpoint, the Johannine narrative exhibits features of Greco-Roman rhetorical traditions. Its sustained use of dialogue as a literary form parallels religious and philosophical dialogues from the wider Mediterranean world. In Mesopotamian, Sumerian, and Babylonian traditions, dialogue often functioned rhetorically as a means of dramatizing truth claims, frequently in the context of divine-human encounters (Walton 2006, 102-5). John appropriates this form but reorients it toward a distinctly Christian claim: that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, the eternal Logos made flesh (John 1:14). Thus, while John borrows from cultural forms, it simultaneously subverts them, distancing Jesus from mythological deities and asserting Him as the incarnate God who fulfills Israel's scriptural hope (Thompson 2001, 89-92).

Another defining characteristic of John's Gospel is its universal scope. Themes of salvation, eternal life, and divine love are repeatedly presented as extending beyond the boundaries of ethnic Israel. The narrative constructs a dualistic framework—those who believe versus those who reject—that echoes patterns in Israel's scriptures but finds its ultimate resolution in Christ as the Messiah (O'Day 1995, 495 - 96). The Johannine dialogues thus become a theological stage upon which the eschatological hope of Israel is revealed as fulfilled in Jesus.

John also emerges as a theological counter-narrative to competing worldviews of the early church. Most notably, Johannine Christology resists Gnostic tendencies that denied the true humanity of Christ by reducing salvation to esoteric spiritual knowledge (Irenaeus 1885, 415 - 16). Against this, John insists repeatedly that the Word became flesh, that Jesus thirsted, wept, and died, thereby affirming His true humanity alongside His divinity (John 11:35; 19:28-30). The Gospel also emphasizes the vital role of the Spirit as the giver of life and interpreter of Jesus' works (John 14:26; 16:13). Without the Spirit's testimony, John suggests, Jesus' deeds could be misconstrued as mere wonders rather than signs pointing to His divine mission (Moloney 1998, 28-30).

In summary, the Gospel of John emerges as a unique theological witness: one that adapts familiar cultural and literary forms yet radically redefines them to proclaim Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, whose mission is universal, whose dialogues unveil divine truth, and whose Spirit continues to animate the community of faith. These theological characteristics provide the essential backdrop for interpreting the transformative encounter in John 4:1-41, where marginalized voices are drawn into God's redemptive mission.

### ***The Socio-Cultural Background in John 4:1-41***

The narrative of John 4:1-41 illustrates the deep-seated social tension between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were regarded as a mixed people—descendants of Israelites who intermarried with foreign nations after the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE (Josephus 2006, 94). This blending of ethnicity and religion, including the Samaritan temple at Mount Gerizim, was considered illegitimate by Jews who emphasized purity after their return

from exile. The destruction of the Samaritan temple by Jewish leaders further entrenched hostility and separation (Purvis 1968, 21). As a result, Samaritans were marginalized, excluded from Israelite identity, and stigmatized within Jewish culture, which makes Jesus' decision to pass through Samaria and engage with its people highly significant.

Although the Gospel of John does not explicitly state Jesus' Jewish identity in this passage, other evidence affirms it. Jesus is portrayed as faithfully practicing Jewish traditions, such as attending weddings (John 2:1-11) and participating in pilgrimages to Jerusalem (John 7:10). His identity as "King of the Jews" is explicitly affirmed in John 19:19 and further underscored in Hebrews 7:14, which emphasizes his lineage from Judah. Even the Samaritan woman could recognize him as a Jew by his clothing, in line with the Torah's command that Jews wear tassels (Num. 15:37; Köstenberger 2004, 155). This background situates Jesus firmly within Jewish tradition, yet in John 4 he transgresses social and religious boundaries by initiating dialogue with a Samaritan woman.

Beyond the Jewish-Samaritan divide, the narrative reveals the marginalized status of women within the patriarchal Greco-Roman and Jewish societies of the first century. Women were often excluded from public spaces and religious authority (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983, 33). By requesting water from a Samaritan woman, Jesus challenges both ethnic prejudice and gender discrimination, affirming her dignity and including her in his mission. Thomas Aquinas interprets the Samaritan woman as a symbol of the church, rejected by society yet embraced by Christ (Aquinas 1947, 172). Thus, John 4:1-41 presents a radical subversion of cultural constructs that marginalized Samaritans and women, showing that in Christ, those deemed inferior are called into participation in God's salvific work.

### ***The Samaritan Woman and Jesus' Transformative Ideology***

The narrative of John 4:1-41 has often been interpreted through the symbol of "living water" and as a story that highlights Jesus' universal mission through cross-cultural dialogue. While these interpretations are significant, the text also subtly emphasizes the pivotal role of women in ministry. This emphasis stands in contrast to prevailing patriarchal structures of the first-century context, where women were frequently regarded as "second-class citizens" under male dominance. Such marginalization has not only shaped biblical interpretation but also continues to affect ecclesial practices today. Thus, this pericope serves as an ideological counter-narrative that reconstructs the role of women within the life of the church.

The introduction of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-6) sets the stage for theological disruption. Jesus' deliberate choice to pass through Samaria is framed as a divine necessity (*dei*), which, as John McHugh notes, suggests missional intention rather than mere convenience (McHugh 2009, 257). His presence in Sychar, near Jacob's well, and the temporal marker of "the sixth hour" highlight unusual circumstances. The woman's solitary approach at noon challenges social norms, as women typically drew water together in the cooler hours. Many interpreters argue that her isolation hints at social marginalization, possibly tied to her marital history (McHugh 2009, 259). These textual peculiarities invite readers to question cultural assumptions about worth and belonging.

The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-9) exemplifies His willingness to cross entrenched boundaries. By requesting water, Jesus not only disregards the hostility between Jews and Samaritans but also breaks purity taboos related to shared utensils (Keener 2003, 600). Furthermore, He transgresses gender norms, as Jewish tradition generally discouraged men from conversing with women in public, especially at wells—a setting often associated with betrothal narratives in the Hebrew Bible (O'Day 1992, 299). Finally, Jesus' initiative engages someone with questionable moral standing, suggesting His mission deliberately reaches into spaces of exclusion.

Jesus' offer of "living water" (John 4:10–15) initially confuses the woman, who interprets His words literally. Yet her respectful address of Jesus as kurios (Lord or sir) signals growing openness. Craig Keener observes that in Johannine theology, water often symbolizes the Spirit, and here Jesus links the Spirit's gift with eternal satisfaction (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 612). Although the woman misunderstands, her response shifts from skepticism to desire, marking the beginning of transformation.

The turning point arrives when Jesus exposes her marital history (John 4:16–18). Whether viewed as evidence of sexual sin or the tragic result of multiple divorces, her situation reflects systemic marginalization. Her evasive response underscores both shame and vulnerability. Yet rather than condemning her, Jesus affirms her truthfulness, initiating a redefinition of her identity. Gail O'Day argues that Jesus here dismantles stereotypes of women as mere moral categories and repositions her as a genuine theological interlocutor (O'Day, "John," 301).

The woman's recognition of Jesus as a prophet (John 4:19–24) further develops the narrative. Some scholars see her theological question about worship as a diversion, while others regard it as genuine engagement with divine matters. Either way, Jesus responds by articulating a radically inclusive theology of worship: "in spirit and truth." This re-centering moves worship away from sacred geography and toward relational authenticity, expanding access to God beyond cultural and gendered confines.

The climax occurs when Jesus reveals His identity as Messiah using the divine formula *egō eimi*—"I am" (John 4:26)—echoing God's self-revelation in Exodus 3:14. This direct disclosure is striking, given that elsewhere in John's Gospel, Jesus often conceals His identity. Here, however, the first explicit messianic confession is entrusted to a marginalized woman. Her subsequent witness to the townspeople ("Come and see") parallels the testimony of earlier disciples like Philip (John 1:46), situating her as a legitimate apostle to her community (Thompson 2015, 118).

The transformation of the Samaritan woman illustrates Jesus' ideology of liberation. Once isolated and socially stigmatized, she becomes a bearer of the gospel. Her story resists cultural constructs that marginalize women and redefines discipleship as inclusive of the socially excluded. Through this narrative, John's Gospel challenges both ancient and contemporary church structures to reconsider the roles of women, not as passive recipients but as active participants in God's mission.

### ***Jesus' Transformative Breakthrough of Boundaries: A Theological Reflection***

Throughout history, women have often been subjected to male dominance, both in Greco-Roman philosophy and later within Christian traditions. Plato, for instance, considered the soul entrapped within the body and suggested that men who failed in their spiritual ascent would be reincarnated as women—a state seen as inferior (Jowett 1892, 123). This philosophical framework laid a foundation for the view that women were second-class beings, a perception that lingered into later cultures. Such notions reveal how women's identities were constructed through patriarchal logic that dismissed their equal humanity.

This marginalization persisted in Jewish and early Christian settings, where patriarchal culture depicted women as intellectually deficient, morally dangerous, and socially subordinate. Their sexuality was framed as a threat to male purity, justifying restrictions and even abuse (Fiorenza 1983, 34-36). Within such contexts, women were denied authority over their own bodies and excluded from leadership in worship and cultural life. Ironically, these exclusions were often presented as divinely sanctioned, reinforcing discrimination as natural and sacred.

Major Christian thinkers perpetuated this bias. Thomas Aquinas, citing Aristotle, denied women the capacity for pulpit ministry on the basis of perceived imperfection (Aquinas 1947,

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92). Martin Luther argued that women could never be “priests of Christ” but only “priests of Satan” (Luther 1931, 314). Similarly, John Calvin insisted that women must remain subject to men because of the fall into sin (Calvin 1948, 239). Such perspectives show how patriarchal ideology infiltrated church theology, shaping stereotypes that silenced women’s voices in the pulpit and beyond.

Against this backdrop, John 4 offers a striking counter-narrative. The Samaritan woman embodies multiple layers of marginalization—ethnic, gendered, and moral. As a woman with a troubled marital past, she was doubly stigmatized in her society. Yet Jesus deliberately engages her in theological conversation, transgressing cultural norms that forbade public dialogue between Jewish men and Samaritan women (Neyrey 2009, 73-75). This encounter exemplifies divine solidarity with the excluded, presenting Jesus as one who disrupts oppressive boundaries.

Theologically, this narrative reflects what James Nelson calls a “theology of acceptance,” in which human dignity is restored through divine embrace (Nelson 1978, 85). Jesus not only acknowledges the Samaritan woman’s reality but also empowers her as a witness to her community. This transformation illustrates God as the “Cosmic Lover,” continually extending healing love to those deemed unworthy. In this way, the Gospel dismantles the moral and social labels imposed by patriarchal structures, offering an alternative vision of inclusion and liberation.

Ultimately, the story of the Samaritan woman challenges the church to reconsider its own complicity in exclusionary practices. Jesus’ approach demonstrates that the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and morality cannot define participation in God’s mission. By entrusting this marginalized woman with the first explicit messianic revelation in John’s Gospel, Jesus proclaims that discipleship is not limited by social hierarchies but is open to all. Her witness becomes a model of transformative discipleship, reminding contemporary communities to embrace those whom society rejects (O’Day 2012, 382).

## Conclusion

The well-known narrative of John 4:1–41 is frequently interpreted through the lenses of pluralism and universality—highlighting Jesus’ cross-cultural dialogue with the Samaritan woman. Yet, a closer, ideologically informed reading unveils a deeper theological dimension: the Samaritan woman, socially marginalized and ostracized by her community, is invited into Jesus’ discipleship mission as His confidante and emissary. By crossing entrenched ethnic, gendered, and moral boundaries, Jesus models inclusivity and liberation, transforming the life of one deemed the most ‘inferior’ in her setting into a powerful witness for her community.

This ideological-critical interpretation paves the way for a contextual theology rooted in the empowerment of marginalized voices. Women, often treated as “second-class citizens” and burdened by stigmatizing labels—especially those with socially tainted pasts—have frequently been excluded from leadership within both societal and ecclesial spheres. As Godibert Gharbin and Ernest van Eck note in their recent theological analysis, Jesus’ engagement with the Samaritan woman in John 4 liberates her capacity to contribute actively to the growth of the believing community (Gharbin & van Eck, 2025). This affirms that God’s mission transcends cultural norms that hinder women’s full participation.

In offering theological reconstruction, this passage resists patriarchal paradigms by positioning marginalized individuals not as ancillary but as foundational to God’s work. The Samaritan woman’s transformation and commissioning affirm that God’s redemptive purposes include those whom society deems unworthy. By promising “living water” and revealing Himself as Messiah, Jesus empowers her to testify—to “come and see”—thus enacting a theology of

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inclusion and mutual recognition. This invites contemporary faith communities to dismantle oppressive systems, honor the agency of women and other excluded groups, and co-labor in the mission of Christ as equal partners.

### Acknowledgment

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

### Declarations

- Author contribution** : DKEP declares that she is the sole author of this research article  
**Funding statement** : This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.  
**Conflict of interest** : The author declares no conflict of interest  
**Additional information** : No additional information is available for this paper

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