

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART VI

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL AND THE RETURN TO CANA

I. Jesus' return to Galilee is presented mostly in the context of His discourse on worship and the waters of eternal life in Samaria and His cure of the centurion's son. Both events focus on Jesus' ministry to those outside the Chosen People. The purified and elevated worship of God and the cleansing and healing power of God is now going forth to all the world.

A. The scene shifts back as Jesus returns to Galilee, apparently to avoid an immediate conflict with the Pharisees or to avoid drawing immediate attention to Himself.

1. Connecting these events to the previous discourses on baptism and being born of water and the spirit, the beginning passage clarifies that Jesus instructed His disciples to baptize and thus began gaining a greater following.

2. Jesus may have had His disciples baptize: (1) to free Him for preaching; (2) so that no one would feel a privileged role later on about being baptized by Jesus Himself, rather than a disciples; and/or (3) in order to give His disciples an example for the future.

3. In any case, the Pharisees quickly learned that the people were coming to Jesus in great numbers, and so He left for Galilee through Samaria. He may have found it necessary to go through Samaria to keep large crowds from following Him, for Jews would generally avoid Samaria.

B. Jesus finds the woman at a well in Sychar, which was called Shechem, in the middle of the region of Samaria. It was the place where Jacob went after reconciling with his brother Esau, whom he had cheated out of their father's blessing for the first born. Perhaps reflecting the theme of reconciliation, Jacob gave that city to Joseph, and it was on the border between the land of the two half tribes that descended from Joseph, Ephraim and Manassah. Gen. 48:22.

- When the northern kingdom, whose capital was the city of Samaria, was conquered by Assyria in 721 B.C., most of the people were deported, and the Assyrians brought in new peoples to inhabit the land. The remnant of the Chosen People who remained there and the newcomers intermingled and developed a religion based upon the Torah, but separating from many of the Jewish practices. The Southern kingdom shunned them and, when the people of the Southern Kingdom

returned from exile in 538, they refused to let the Samaritans help rebuild the Temple or worship there, for they were considered heretics. The Samaritans then tried to hinder the rebuilding of the Temple and, when that did not work, built an alternate temple on Mount Gerezin, and the rivalry between the two nations increased. When the Southern Kingdom won independence in the Maccabean revolt of the second century B.C., they also conquered Samaria, destroyed the Temple on Mount Gerezin, and tried to force the Samaritans back to Jewish worship. However, when the Romans took control of the whole area in 63 B.C., the Samaritans were allowed to continue in their own land. The result was a bitter enmity between the two peoples, such that Jews would generally have nothing to do with Samaritans.

- It is remarkable from the start that the disciples were willing even to go ahead of Jesus to buy food from the Samaritans.

C. Jesus, being fully human, was tired and thirsty from the journey, and uses this human need to begin appealing to the Samaritan woman, for it is clear from the discourse that a direct rebuke would have met with resistance.

- It would be highly unusual for someone to come at about noon to get water from the well, for that was about the hottest time of the day. It is likely that this woman was avoiding other people because of her scandalous background.

D. The discourse then picks up on the theme of water, and uses a play on words, for the same term for "living water" also means "flowing water."

- Jesus offers the woman "living water," which she interprets simply as flowing water, a gift that would be higher than Jacob's, for he only established a well that provided water gained through a slow laborious effort, rather than a stream on the earth.

- As He had done for Nicodemus, Jesus then explains further saying that the water He will give will provide eternal life beyond any thirst. This explanation may have created in the woman's mind images of a Messianic kingdom, where the earth would naturally be watered. Cf. Ex. 3:8; Duet. 28:1-15. The woman again understands only in material terms.

E. Jesus seems to switch subjects, asking about her husband. In fact, with His prophetic knowledge, He is calling her to repentance that will allow her to receive the live giving water of grace.

- She, presumably not understanding what He knows, defers the questions. Jesus then brings the truth home to her, but in

a fashion recognizing that she has not actually lied. He is trying to be as diplomatic as possible, while at the same time presenting the necessary truth.

- At the factual level, this woman's condition reflects a life that has gone very badly, although possibly through her husbands dying rather than divorce. On a symbolic level, going through numerous husbands calls to mind the images of going through numerous gods, none of which is satisfying. In the Old Testament, the prophets compared Israel's infidelity to God to infidelity in marriage. See, e.g., Ez. 16; Hos 2:4-15; Mal. 2:11-12 (infidelity to the Temple). The number five is fitting because the Samaritans were Jews mixed with five other nationalities, each of had their own god. See 2 Kings 17:24. The restoration of Israel to God is compared to a husband receiving His wife back. See Is. 54:5, Hos. 2:19-20.

F. Apparently to change the subject, she then asks about the fitting place to worship.

1. Jesus, as a good teacher, picks up on her interest and again presents the truth in a diplomatic fashion.

2. He presents the truth that the Jews are right about the highest place to worship, Jerusalem, rather than Mount Gerezin as the most sacred place on earth, and in general understand God better because of God's revelation to them. However, He does recognize that the Samaritans truly worship God, although they do not understand Him.

3. Jesus then proclaims that the hour is coming when the people will worship God everywhere because the worship will be in the Spirit. The idea seems to be that the Temple is the earthly reflection of the Temple in heaven where the angels and saints are in the presence of God. See, e.g., Is. 6. However, soon, and in fact now, because of Christ, all people will be able to worship in the presence of Christ. See, e.g., Heb. 8:5; Rev. 4.

4. Grasping something grand at stake, the woman then recognizes that the Messianic era may be about to begin. Although not accepting the prophets of the Old Testament, many of the Samaritans like the Jews, believe that a Messiah would come with a new glorious kingdom, spreading throughout the whole earth. Jesus then makes it clear that He is the Messiah. The phrase "I am He" would in Greek be the same as "I am," (Ego eimi) the term God used to identify Himself to Moses. Ex. 3:14.

G. Then Jesus's disciples return and are astonished that He is speaking to the Samaritan woman.

1. They may have thought He had stayed behind to avoid being defiled by contact with Samaritans.
2. The disciples offer Him food, and He picks up on their concern to present another image of the kingdom of God. People are spiritually fed by doing the will of God, which here means bringing the Gospel to the Samaritans. He then presents this food as available in abundance as it is at the harvest. (The reference to the harvest being in three or four months probably meant that it was May or June, i.e. between Passover, the background to the cleansing of the temple and Pentecost, which will apparently be the background to the cure on the Sabbath.)
3. There is also a call to build upon the work of others, and recognize the contributions of others. Here Jesus Himself is setting the example by relying on the Samaritan woman to evangelize the town, as well as the disciples to send for the Gospel to others.

H. Meanwhile, the woman goes back to the town and announces to them the news of the Messiah.

- She makes no attempt to excuse her past actions, and in fact presents Jesus' knowledge of them as evidence that He could be the Messiah.
- The Samaritans then go from believing because of her word to experiencing Jesus in person, as the disciples of John the Baptist did. It is an indication of Jesus' healing power that this woman who had been shunned because of scandal now takes on a role akin to John the Baptist, showing the way to Christ.

II. Jesus then returns to Galilee, again on a third day. The Gospel connects this miracle to the first one.

A. There are several other connections between this miracle and the changing of water into wine at Cana.

- Jesus performs a miracle for one person (here the centurion's son) at the request of another (the centurion), based upon family love, albeit in this case the family is the one for whom the miracle is performed.
- Jesus at first seems to be reluctant to perform the miracle, but after a further request made in faith, does so. He also performs the miracle at a distance, partially disguising his role, instead letting servants reveal the change.

- As the disciples began with a certain level of belief, but "came to belief" because of the first miracle in Cana, so the centurion's family does the same.

B. The connections may have been designed to make these miracles the beginning and end of a part of the Gospel, especially focusing on the love of God sent out to all the world.

1. These events: (1) begin with the Blessed Virgin Mary believing; (2) continue on with the disciples and possibly Nicodemus believing; (3) proceeds onto the spread of the Gospel among the Chosen People as indicated by the many baptisms of the disciples at first; and then (4) record the bringing of the Gospel to Samaria, and finally to the presumably pagan centurion and his household.

2. This set of account may also form a chiasmic structure, with the first half focusing on the fulfillment of prophecies regarding a restored earth, a purified worship, and a new birth in the spirit and the second half focusing on the presentation of the Gospel to the outside world.

- The process in the first half from Galilee to Jerusalem is from: (1) a miracle at Cana involving the persistent intercession of Mary for the couple; to (2) the cleansing of the Temple and Temple worship and prediction that Jesus Himself would rise and be the new Temple; and then to (3) the discussion with Nicodemus about the new birth in water and the Spirit.

- Then the central passage in the middle describes God's love for the world and the choice of entering into the light of that love or remaining in darkness to disguise one's deeds.

- Then the process goes from the area just northeast of Jerusalem back to Cana and involves parallel events in the reverse order: (1) a discussion with the disciples of another Jewish figure focused on the baptism of Jesus and of John; (2) Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman about the cleansing power of the water He will provide and the new worship in spirit and truth; and (3) another miracle at Cana involving the persistent intercession of the centurion.