

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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A Little Background on Samaria

by Dan Trygg

“When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ² (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), ³ He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee. ⁴ And He had to pass through Samaria. ⁵ So He came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; ⁶ and Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. ⁷ There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, ‘Give Me a drink.’ ⁸ For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. ⁹ The Samaritan woman therefore said to Him, ‘How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?’ (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)” John 4:1-9

We see from the first verse that Jesus was already aware of the danger of arousing the jealousy of the Pharisees. If John's ministry drew their criticism, now Jesus' larger and growing popularity would certainly make Him a target (cf. Jn. 1:19-28; Matt. 11:7-19; 21:23-45). He had ruffled the feathers of the priests by cleansing the temple (2:13f). Most of them were Sadducees. Together, Pharisees and Sadducees were the religious leaders in power.

We learn from the second verse that **Jesus was not doing the baptizing, but His followers were. Four possible reasons why Jesus chose not to baptize people:** (a.) **He was too busy teaching and healing.** The demand for His healing ministry was incredibly intense (Mk. 1:32-45; 3:7-12,20). The logistics of dealing with these large crowds may have demanded that He share this aspect of ministry with His followers. Not only would it have been virtually impossible to personally baptize each one, it would have been physically exhausting. (b.) **It was an important way of making a clear distinction between Himself and John.** Jesus was *not* simply One who picked up on John's message and style and struck out on His own. He had no intention of being summarized in people's mind as “another Baptist”. Jesus did not ignore or reject John's work, however. By continuing to include baptism as a significant part of His preaching and ministry, Jesus identified with and built upon the pioneering work of John the Baptist. By *not* personally baptizing anyone, however, He demonstrated that His ministry style and message were different than John's. (c.) **He desired to involve His followers in “hands-on” ministry from the beginning, because His vision was to *train disciples to carry on after He was gone.*** Not only was this good, practical experience, it also would have promoted a sense of “ownership” among those who were doing the baptizing. They would have more closely identified with Jesus and His work. (d.) **It may even have been to avoid the unhealthy “one-up” comparisons that the disciples later argued about** (e.g., Matt. 18:1-5; 20:20-28; Mk. 9:33-37; Lk. 22:24-27; cf. I Cor. 1:10-17). To say, “I was baptized by Jesus Himself”, as a basis of spiritual authority could easily be avoided by simply *not* personally baptizing *anyone*.

It is important to note that Jesus had not yet identified the men who later became His twelve apostles. That did not take place until some time later (Mk. 3:13-19; Lk. 6:12-16), certainly not until after the Baptist had been taken into custody by Herod (Matt. 4:12,13; Mk. 1:14; Lk. 4:14-31). The significance of this observation in this context is to see that **Jesus was allowing common followers to do the baptizing.** There were no “special followers”, no “holy orders” or “clergy”, among the followers of Jesus. **He was employing the “laity” of His day to do this “rite” of baptism.** I think that this is an important realization, because I believe that it has been to our loss that this act has been removed from the responsibilities of the average believer and come to be reserved only for “the religious professional”. It is just one more way in which the everyday Christian gets the message that s/he really is not a significant player in the work of the kingdom of God, or in his/her involvement as a spiritual support person in the lives of others.

The next couple of verses tell us the reason for the following unusual story. Samaria was directly north of Judea, Galilee was north of that. **To directly go from Judea to Galilee, Jesus would have to go through Samaria.**

Sychar (vs. 5) was a village near Shechem, ...or possibly a variant name for Shechem. There is evidence of a ruined village, occupied in NT times, that was only ¼ mile from the well, and which had no springs of its own. This seems to best fit the NT description. The patriarch, Jacob, had purchased a piece of land from Hamor, the father of Shechem, and built shelters there. (The story of Jacob's dealings with them, and the tragedy that took place, are recorded in Genesis 33:18-34:31.) When Jacob was on his death bed, he gave an extra portion to Joseph as an inheritance (The Hebrew for the word “portion” is *shechem*, meaning literally “shoulder”, as in a “ridge” of land. -- Gen. 48:21,22). John mentions that “Jacob's well was there” (vs. 6). No specific OT reference indicates that Jacob dug a well here. As a sojourner and outsider, it would have been expedient to avoid hostility with his neighbors by having his own water source instead of watering his flocks at the wells or springs of the Shechemites (cf. Gen. 21:22-31; 26:18-22). The well is about one mile east of the site of ancient Shechem, right at the foot of Mt. Gerizim. **Jacob's well lay directly in the fork where the main road from Jerusalem splits, ...one portion to the northeast and the other continuing due north.**

Jesus was weary and thirsty from His journey. This is a good example of the Lord's humanity. He experienced the fatigue of physical exertion (cf. Heb. 2:17,18; 4:14-16). He and the disciples arrived there at "the sixth hour". That would be noon, the hot part of the day. Normally, no one would be at the well during the heat of the day. Nevertheless, "There came a woman of Samaria to draw water." *This* was a strange thing, ...a woman coming to the well *at this moment*. (Evening was the common time of the day to get water -- Genesis 24:11.) Jesus responded to the unusual circumstance, seeing in it the probable provision of His Father, in some fashion or another. "Give Me a drink" (vs. 7).

The woman responded, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" **Jesus had crossed two, possibly three, social barriers in addressing this woman: First, she was Samaritan**, and as John points out in the latter half of this verse, the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. **Secondly, she was a woman**, and it was considered somewhat brash or ostentatious to speak to a woman who was not an acquaintance or family friend. **Finally, because she had come to the well at this time of day, she may have been a woman of questionable character** coming during "off hours" to avoid public harassment. **For Jesus the rabbi to speak to such a woman would have been to risk "defilement"** in the minds of some people. The Pharisees, for example, customarily avoided any contact with the "sinners", the common people, lest they be sullied by them. How different is Jesus' behavior toward this less-than-righteous woman of Samaria! (It could be also that she was attempting to discern if He was thinking of propositioning her as a prostitute. Her mention of His Jewish heritage and her Samaritan background may have been to say, in effect, "Hey, what's *really* going on here? Jews don't normally talk with us Samaritans. What do You *really* want?")

John adds the comment, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans". Why? There were really two issues behind this attitude, a historical racial difference and a current religious difference.

The origin of the Samaritan people is found recorded in II Kg. 17. As a result of the sins of the northern kingdom of Israel, **Yahweh removed the Israelites, deporting them to other countries far away (721 B.C.). In their place, the Assyrians brought people from other countries to populate the region of Samaria.** At first, they did not worship Yahweh, but He sent lions among them, which killed numerous people. They asked the Assyrian king to send them Israelite priests to teach them "the custom of the god of the land", so that He would afflict them no longer. Consequently, they learned "how they should fear Yahweh", but they also continued to worship the gods of their own countries. We know, however, that there still were Jews dwelling in this northern territory (II Chron. 30:1-12; II Kg. 23:15-25; II Chron. 35:18). **Evidently, the influence of the Jews of this northern region was relatively strong, for the Samaritan peoples came to accept a faith that was fairly similar to Judaism. Originally, they were not accepted by the Jews primarily because of their mixed national backgrounds and because of the danger of religious compromise** that had historically occurred when Israel had mixed with "the people of the land" (cf. Ez. 9,10; Neh. 13:1-9).

When the Jews returned after the Babylonian exile (537 B.C.), the "people of the land" expressed a desire to assist in the reconstruction of the temple, saying, "Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here (Ez. 4:1-5)." Whether or not they were sincere in their stated intention, **they were rebuffed by the leaders of the Jewish refugees. From that point, they attempted to oppose the building of the temple**, discouraging and frightening the workers, and using political and legal channels to halt the work. When ultimately *that* failed, **it seems that in reaction to the temple in Jerusalem the "inhabitants of the land" decided to build their own temple at Mt. Gerizim, and the Samaritan religion was formalized.** This temple was later destroyed by John Hyrcanus, the nephew of Judas Maccabeus, who became the Jewish High Priest and head of state in 135 B.C. He crushed the Samaritan opposition to the Jewish state, capturing and razing the city of Samaria (ca. 107 B.C.). **Though politically defeated, the old hostilities remained. There was considerable basis for bitterness on both sides.** Eventually, all of Palestine was conquered by the Romans in 63 B.C. They initiated the reconstruction of the city of Samaria, but later Herod the Great greatly adorned it, spending more than ten years on its reconstruction. Herod's love for this city once again brought trade, influence, and prestige to the Samaritan peoples. Upon his death, his kingdom was portioned out into four "tetrarchies", Judea, Galilee, the Decapolis, and Samaria. At the time of Jesus' ministry, Samaria was under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate, as was Judea. **The continued animosity of the Jews toward Samaritans was evident in the early months of the revolt against Rome, when the Jewish insurrectionists attacked and sacked the city in 66 A.D.**

In many ways the Samaritan faith was similar to Judaism. They accepted the Pentateuch, the five books written by Moses, as their Bible. Samaritans were despised, but at least they observed the dietary and cleanliness laws of the Torah, so they weren't as disgusting as gentiles, in the mind of the Jews. **The major point of disagreement with the Jews was that they taught that the central place of worship, "the place in which Yahweh your God shall choose for His name to dwell" (Deut. 12:10,11), was supposed to be Shechem, not Jerusalem.** The rejection of most of the remainder of the Old Testament seems to have been motivated by the emphasis upon the Jerusalem temple and upon the prophetic importance of Israel in bringing the salvation of God.