

question, 'What is truth?' We will leave the reader to pursue this study for himself. (There are 25 references to the noun ἀλήθεια (truth) and 14 to the adjective ἀληθής (true) and 9 to the adjective ἀληθινός (true), with many more references in John's letters and the book of Revelation.)

The Coming Messiah

In verse 25 the woman turns her attention to the future: 'I know that Messiah is coming, who is called Christ; when he comes he will tell us all things.' Like many people she clung to the past (Jacob's well) while she dreamt about the future.

There is an extent to which it is right to look to the future and the past. If we know something of God's planned intentions we will not so easily find ourselves working in opposition to him, building up what he is pulling down, and trying to pull down what he is building up. 'Where there is no vision the people perish.' We need a God-given, prophetic insight into the future, if we are to walk in line with God in the present. This is not the same as a dead adherence to some doctrinal position on eschatology. This woman believed firmly in a coming Messiah, as many people do today, but it was not the kind of belief that changed her life, or enabled her to recognise him when he stood before her. Many others in her day who believed in the coming Messiah were among those who crucified him when he came. I have little doubt that the position today is much the same.

Jesus brought the woman sharply from the future to the present with the words (translated literally), 'I AM, the one who is speaking to you.' Jesus is the great I AM - not *I will be*, nor *I was*, but I AM. For her, at least, the hour of revelation was now.

Jesus gave her this revelation of himself, and we can see by her reaction that she received it. She left her miserable old water pot and returned to the city to bring others out to meet her newly-found Messiah.

So this woman moved into a present revelation. Here lies a test of a man or woman who claims to know God. Is he the God of today? Does he speak the language of today? Does he meet the problems and needs of today? Some people spend their lives trying to fight the battles of yesterday. They want to re-establish the reformation, or the revivals of previous centuries, or the Pentecostal movement, or - yes - the early church. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living; not the God of the past or the future, but of the present. We praise God for each saint who has like David 'served his generation, and fallen asleep'. It is for us to serve ours, not theirs. This we will do if we are able to hear for ourselves the words that Jesus spoke to this woman: 'I AM, the one who is speaking to you.'

The Woman of Samaria



Jesus and the woman of Samaria.

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This and other writings available from:

Robert Beecham
Linden Cottage
The Burgage
Prestbury
Cheltenham
GL52 3DJ

or from website
www.GrowthInGod.org.uk

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wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit' (John 3: 8).

The priests of the Old Covenant held their office by natural descent from their fathers. Everyone knew who they were. The priests of the New are spiritual priests, ordained by God, not man. They cannot be distinguished by special clothes or titles. Only a spiritual man can discern and recognise them.

The Old temple was a natural building, made from natural stone. The New temple is made of spiritual living stones, which are held together not by natural means but by the wonderful God-given unity of the Spirit.

The feasts of the Old Covenant were natural feasts on clearly defined days of the year to which everybody could easily relate. The New feasts are spiritual experiences which we can and must enjoy as God reveals their meaning to us by the Spirit.

None of these great spiritual realities of the New Covenant can be discerned or understood properly by the natural mind. 'A natural mind does not receive the things of the Spirit of God ... because they are spiritually discerned' (1 Cor 2: 14).

... and in Truth

What did Jesus mean by *in truth*?

The Greek word for truth, (ἀλήθεια), also has the sense of *reality*. The sacrifices and ceremonies of the Old Covenant were shadows (see Heb 8: 5 and 10: 1). The New Covenants is the real thing. A shadow is a perfect replica of its original, but has no substance. Like a photograph, it has no value in itself. It points to something else which is the reality. A photograph of your family, when you are far away, is much better than nothing; but it is a poor substitute for actually being with them. It is only a lifeless reminder. A photograph of someone you have never met will give you an indication of his outward appearance, but you will never know him in reality till you meet him face to face. Thus the Old Covenant was just pictures and photographs: perfect replicas of spiritual realities, but in themselves of no value. 'It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins' (Heb 10: 4). The blood of Jesus, the spotless true Lamb of God is the reality.

To the natural mind the things that the eye can see and the ear can hear and the hands can touch are real and substantial. The realm of the spirit is shadowy and uncertain. With God it is the other way, for God himself is spirit. The things of the spirit are solid, permanent and real. The whole material realm is transitory and will pass away when it has served its purpose.

Truth and reality then do not lie in the sacrifices and ceremonies of the Old Covenant - far less in the church's imitations of them - but in the spiritual realm that lies behind them.

We could amplify this theme by studying the words true and truth throughout John's gospel. 'My flesh is true bread, and my blood is true drink' (6:55). 'You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (8: 32) 'I am the ... truth ...' (14:6). 'I am the true vine' (15: 1). 'For this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice' (18: 37), and Pilate's answering

against us? We must know where you worship. We must have a label for you so that we will know whether we can safely have fellowship with you or not.

Listen to the strange reply Jesus gave her. **‘Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.’** God had something much beyond them both. Both had known God’s blessing in the past, but both were part of a passing order.

What Jesus said here was radical. For centuries even then Jerusalem had been the centre of all Jewish religious and national aspirations and hopes, as it is till this present day. It had become so by the command of God. It was the place where he had chosen to put his name. It was there that every pious Jew who was able went three times a year for the great feasts of God, not just by human tradition, but by divine decree. Jesus was sweeping aside centuries of tradition and proclaiming the end of an order. **‘If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her cunning’.** This was the sad lament of the Jews in captivity in Babylon. **‘Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth is Mount Zion ... the city of the great king.’** Did Jesus not know the scriptures? Of course he knew them, but he read their spiritual meaning. He was from above, and spoke the words of God, and he knew that the visible Jerusalem was nothing more than an earthly shadow of the heavenly reality.

Jesus did not consider Samaria and Jerusalem equal. He said plainly in verse 22, **‘You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.’** In the same way, if we press the point, we cannot consider all denominations equal, as many people seem to today. Protestantism was born in a true move of the Holy Spirit as people searched the scriptures for the truth. Methodism likewise was a move of God that had to break away from a corrupt and backslidden church. The Brethren and Pentecostal movements were each gracious and wonderful restorations to true believers of truths and experiences which had largely been lost since the days of the early church.

Nevertheless Jesus looked forward to a new order. **‘An hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth’** (23, 24). Had this new order arrived? Jesus said, **‘An hour is coming, and now is ...’** Strictly speaking it had not yet come, but those who walk by faith, like the saints of the Old Testament, can move ahead of their time. It was future for the majority, but present for those able to enter in. In the same way now I believe a new order is coming and now is.

In Spirit ...

What did Jesus mean by *in spirit*?

Spirit is in contrast with flesh. The Old Covenant had been a covenant of the flesh. It was the natural order with everything visible to the natural eye and plain to the natural mind. Its people, the Jews, were a natural people, clearly distinguishable from others. Entrance to the Old Covenant was by natural birth into a Jewish family. The New Covenant is a covenant in the spirit. You enter it by spiritual birth. **‘Unless you are born of water and of the spirit, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God.’** This birth is invisible to the natural eye. It is like the wind which **‘blows where it**

Introduction

The fourth chapter of John’s gospel contains the familiar story of the woman of Samaria. As with many other parts of Scripture, there is much more in this story than what appears on its surface. Beneath lies a mine of spiritual truth and enlightenment, if our eyes are but open to see it. Jewels of truth light up in verses which we have read a hundred times and seen little more than the printed words. In this paper I hope to dig a little deeper and find some of these hidden gems.

Numbering the People

We will start with the first three verses. **‘When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptising more disciples than John (although Jesus himself was not baptising, but his disciples were), he left Judaea, and went away again into Galilee.’**

The Pharisees were interested in the number of people Jesus was baptising. Numbers were important to them. The carnal man is interested in the outward effects of a ministry. He delights in statistics. How many conversions were there? How many people joined the church? Were there some dramatic healings that would make good “testimonies”? Did some local dignitaries take an interest? And, as here, how many were baptised?

We read in 1 Chronicles 21:1 that Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel. David fell to this temptation which even Joab his ungodly commander-in-chief knew to be wrong. David wanted to know how many men he could muster so that he could feel secure in the power of his armies. He followed the principle of Babel - **‘Let us build for ourselves a city, ... and ... make for ourselves a name; lest we be scattered abroad ...’** and of Nebuchadnezzar - **‘Is not this great Babylon which I have built?’** David had forgotten the words of his friend Jonathan, **‘The Lord is not restrained to save by many or by few’**, when he went out with only his armour bearer to put the Philistines to rout (1 Sam 14:6). He had forgotten his own experience when he defeated the Philistine giant Goliath single-handed. In consequence the judgment of God fell on Israel and David had to confess, **‘I have sinned greatly, in that I have done this thing.’**

The Pharisees were comparing the numbers of those baptised by Jesus and John the Baptist. How did Jesus respond to this situation? The answer is surprising but simple. He left. I doubt if many modern evangelists would have thought of this answer. If they were having the most successful ministry in the city, would it seem right to quit to avoid getting into competition? Possibly also he and his disciples ceased baptising altogether. At least there is no further record of them doing so in the gospels.

Why did Jesus leave? Maybe the people there were not ready for his ministry. Maybe they still needed to respond to the foundational teaching of John on repentance before they could receive what he had to give them.

Let us note in passing the parenthesis of verse 2. 'Jesus himself was not baptising, but his disciples were.' Paul followed this pattern (1 Cor 1: 14-17). Neither he nor Jesus wanted or needed to exalt their own status. Others could take the prominent position. How much better it is for a man to hide the outward workings of his ministry than to parade them before an admiring public.

Spiritual Understanding

So Jesus left respectable Judaea and set out for Galilee via Samaria. He sat down by Jacob's well while his disciples went to the city to buy bread. When a solitary gentile woman came to draw water, the scene must have appeared less promising than the crowds he had just left. He broke at least two rules when he asked her to give him a drink, and a strange conversation followed.

Perhaps more than any other part of the Scriptures, when we come to read John's gospel, we cannot understand it with the natural mind. We might well set a preface to it and indeed to the whole Bible the words of Isaiah, "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways,'" says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts"' (55: 8, 9). In fact we have words very similar to these at the end of John chapter 3 and immediately preceding the passage we are considering. 'He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all ... no man receives his witness ... For he whom God has sent speaks the words of God' (3:31-34).

Jesus was from above. His thoughts and words were the thoughts and words of God. To the extent that our minds are renewed and transformed by his Spirit we will understand what he said and did. If we persist in reading the scriptures with unrenewed minds, the oft-repeated words of the gospels will be written as epitaphs on our spiritual tombs '... and they did not understand what he said.'

Jesus was the mediator of the New Covenant, just as Moses was the mediator of the Old Covenant. The New Covenant is essentially a heavenly and spiritual covenant. The Old Covenant dealt mainly in the earthly and natural realm. The Old could be understood by the natural man, but the New can only be understood by people with spiritual understanding. In the New Covenant 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, ... there is neither male nor female' (Gal 3:28) both of which distinctions had been vitally important in the old. Jesus disregarded both when he began to speak to a gentile woman on spiritual matters. The natural distinctions of the old give way to spiritual distinctions in the new. The true Jews are those who are God's people in the spirit rather than in the flesh.

Jacob's Well

So we see Jesus seated by Jacob's well near Mount Gerizim, places with deep spiritual associations of the past. He asks the woman for a drink, and she responds in amazement, 'How is it that you, being a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?' She cannot bridge the great natural divisions. When she declines, he then offers her a drink of living water. This time she responds with unbelief, 'You have nothing to

draw with and the well is deep; where then do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us the well?' The transition from natural thought to spiritual is great, and she has not understood his meaning. He explains, 'Everyone who drinks from this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks from the water which I will give him will never thirst; but the water which I will give him will become a well of water in him springing up to eternal life.'

What a marvellous contrast we find between her words and his. She speaks of the inaccessible water of the Old Covenant deep down in the well, requiring a weary trudge from the village and available only to those with special equipment to get it out. He speaks of a new internal and never-failing supply that is always on hand. How many weary hours have we spent trudging to Jacob's wells in the midday heat to bring home heavy bucketfuls of water to see us through the day!

In verse 13 the woman replies, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty, nor come all the way here to draw.' Probably this was a flippant reply, but Jesus had an answer. 'Go and call your husband, and come here.' The woman answered, 'I have no husband.' Jesus answered, 'You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.'

We can read these words on different levels. At the first level they were a revelation of the woman's immoral life. They were a manifestation of the power of God and a sign for an unbeliever. She saw that Jesus knew her, even if she did not know him. She was dealing with God, not man, and God was dealing with her. She began to be humble and ready to listen.

At a deeper level these words have a meaning far beyond their original context. Isaiah said, 'Your maker is your husband' (54: 5). Marriage throughout the scriptures symbolises relationship with God. He is a jealous God, and unwilling to share us with any rival. He wants us for himself. To whom or to what are you married? Does your maker have your undivided love? Or does your church or your fellowship have first place in your heart? Or are you married to your career, or your work, or your ministry?

Nothing and no one suffer when you give God his rightful place. Everything else also falls into its rightful place after him.

Which Denomination?

In verse 19 we see the woman's conscience awakened, and so she begins to talk about religion. 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and you (Jews) say that in Jerusalem is the place where people should worship.' How often we have heard it! The endless discussions on which church or fellowship you belong to. In those days also it was nothing new. The Samaritans had worshipped for centuries on Mount Gerizim where Joshua had pronounced the blessings upon Israel long before. The Jews had worshipped at Jerusalem where David had had his capital and Solomon had built the temple. To which would Jesus give his blessing? Whom would he pronounce holy? Are you Catholic or Protestant? Do you attend a traditional denomination or a house fellowship? Are you for us or