

John's Gospel : a study for fellowship groups

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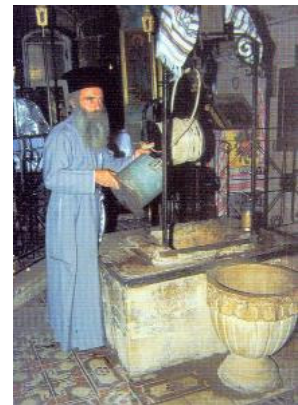
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(5) The Woman at the Well (John 4:1-30;39-42)

Palestine has been a politically sensitive area for most of its history. Today the site of this account is in the West Bank near Nablus. In Jesus' day it was at Sychar in Samaria. There was no love lost between Jew and Samaritan. Jacob had 12 sons and when the Israelites returned from slavery in Egypt and into Canaan, the land was divided between the descendants of each, the twelve Tribes as they were called. The two southerly placed Tribes, Judah and Benjamin became more and more dominant and Jerusalem itself was in their own territory. It was always a point of conflict that the other 10 Tribes had to journey to Jerusalem for the annual sacrifices. There was a lot of oppression of God's people (forced labour and the like) at the end of Solomon's reign but when his son, Rehoboam, succeeded him, he chose not to listen to reason from the nation's leaders, but to threaten to increase the harsh treatment. This led to the 10 ceding from the union. Two nations, Judah and Israel (the northern 10) were formed, had their own kings and gave each other as little support as possible. Clearly Israel could were no longer comfortable in the prospect of coming to Jerusalem to worship and so set up their own altars at Bethel in the south and Dan in the far north instead.

In the 4th century B.C. the Samaritans assumed the mantle of the 'northern kingdom' and set up a shrine on nearby Mount Gerazim (Jn 4:20). It was an historically important site because the children of Israel as they were then called were told that when they entered the Promised Land they should gather in two companies, the Ark of the Covenant in the valley between, on Mounts Gerizim and Ebor, reciting the blessings and curses predicted by God (Deut 11:28-30;27:11-13 Josh 8:33) in relation future obedience or disobedience as the case might be.



It seems to be accepted by all four religions tracing their ancestry to Abraham, Jews, Samaritans (of whom there are very few left today), Muslims and Christians, that this well was indeed the one which Jacob used when he came to set up home in this area. The Old Testament does not tell us this but does tell us that he bought the land here (Gen 33:18-19). It was and to some extent still is after seemingly endless ages, a very refreshing well which delivers cool water. It's depth has varied hugely over the centuries from 15M to 80M, perhaps even deeper at the time Jesus visited it. The water was not held in a cistern but came from running underground water-courses, and for that reason was often referred to as *living water*.

Q 1 What was the gift of God to which Jesus referred (4:10), do you think?

Q 2 Do we feel as though we are often standing, as it were, on the mount ... Gerizim or Ebor?

Q 3 You can see the word-play which Jesus made when talking about the living water, the spring of water that he will give. Jesus often took ordinary things which he came across to teach deep spiritual truths. Can we think of some?

Jesus proceeded to talk about worship after the woman brought the subject up in a contentious way. Although there were strict instructions in the Old Testament to regulate worship, these were going to be superceded by the sufferings and death of Christ and the new era which that event would usher in. "A time is coming ...", Jesus said.

Q 4 Where to worship will not be the important issue (4:21), Jesus says. How well have we really learned that?

What will be important is who we worship – worship targeted on the Father (4:23). It will also be important that it is worship translated and enabled by the Spirit (4:23-24). We might add that it should also be taught, by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, according to the scripture (Jn 16:13) There are three useful steps here in making worship what it should be:

- ❑ Putting material concerns to one side – the woman went back to the town, leaving her water jar at the well (4:28)
- ❑ Having an openness to God – the woman was prepared to accept and acknowledge the all searching eye of Jesus on her life (4:29)
- ❑ *Read John 4:31-34* Getting into the will of God. (4:34)

