



Sychar & Jacob's Well

BY JOHN MASON

IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, a well was a place of meeting. The Old Testament tells several stories of key meetings at wells that resulted in marriages. Abraham's servant met Rebekah at a well near Haran and subsequently arranged her marriage to Isaac (Gen. 24), Jacob met his future wife Rachel at a well in the general vicinity of Haran (29:1-12), and Moses met the seven daughters of Jethro at a well in Midian and later married one of them, Zipporah (Ex. 2:15-21). My colleague Rabbi Michael Panitz is fond of saying, "The well was the pick-up bar of the ancient world."¹ In telling of Jesus meeting the unnamed woman at Jacob's well, John depicted not primarily the meeting of a man and woman, but the meeting of two cultures and an invitation to the Samaritan people to faith in Jesus.

Jacob's Well

Jacob's well was located at the entrance of the ravine between Mount Gerizim to the southwest and Mount Ebal to the north, near a key fork in the major north-south road from Galilee to Jerusalem and the west road to the city of Samaria and the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. While it was not the preferred way for Jews to travel, since it required travel through Samaria, it was the necessary route when one needed quick travel.²

Archaeologists have confidently identified Jacob's well. Its location at the entrance to the foot of Mount Gerizim conforms to John's description of the well's location (4:20). In addition to Christian tradition, Jewish, Samaritan, and Muslim tradition also identifies this well as Jacob's well. A Greek Orthodox church has been under construction at the site since 1903. Visitors to the well still receive a drink of its water.³ The Old Testament does not mention a well belonging to Jacob, but this well is near the site of Jacob's burial at Shechem, a site that Joseph's clan received (Josh. 24:32).

In several ways the well's physical attributes bring to life the gospel story of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman. First, John said Jesus sat on (Greek, *epi*) the well. While the lower portion of the well is cut through stone, the upper portion is made of masonry. Moreover, a stone found near the site in 1881 is believed to be the well's cover. Second, the woman told Jesus that the well was deep. Jacob's well is 100 feet deep and is fed by underground sources—which provide cool, refreshing water—as well as rain water.⁴ Finally, this refreshing water conforms well to the play on words in Jesus' promise to the woman that He could provide "living water," which may also bear the meaning "running water" in Greek. As the well can provide fresh water to renew the body, so Jesus can provide living water to restore an ailing spirit.

The Village of Sychar

While archaeologists think they have identified the site of Jacob's well, the identification of the "city" of Sychar is much more difficult and remains open to debate. Two sites are possible. One possibility is Shechem (the site of Tel

Belatah), located some 1300 feet from Jacob's well. The proximity of the city to the well makes it a logical choice. Moreover, the description of Jacob's dwelling before (possibility meaning, to the east of) Shechem (Gen. 33:18) conforms to the location of the well east of the city. Finally, the name Sychar could easily be a corruption of the Greek form of the name Shechem (Sychem). The second possibility is the present village of Askar. Askar is located about a mile from the well. Moreover, it has a separate well, although its water is not as good as the water from Jacob's well. Whether the well dates back to the time of Jesus is uncertain.

One cannot identify either of these sites with confidence as the city of Sychar. On the one hand, the Jews destroyed Shechem in 107 B.C. under John Hyrcanus—who had earlier destroyed the temple on Mount Gerizim's



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: JAMES MCLEMORE (2/14/18)

Previous page: View of modern Shechem. After reuniting with Esau, Jacob "camped within sight of the city" of Shechem (Gen. 33:18, NIV).



Right: The Church of Justinian on Mount Gerizim with Mount Ebal in the background. Jacob's well was located where the ravine between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal begins.



about 200 yards up a steep incline. It is not a fond memory. I can still remember; it felt as if the wire handle of the

Left: A well in the city of Sychar that is traditionally thought to be Jacob's Well.

Lower left: The main route north of Damascus going toward Homs, which is the third largest city in modern Syria and is about 100 miles north of Damascus. This is the probable route of the journey of Abraham and Jacob.

Below: These undeciphered clay tablets, possibly of Philistine origin, are from the Late Bronze Age II. They were found at Deir 'Alla, which is the biblical Succoth where Jacob wrestled the angel.



summit in 128 B.C.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the city no longer existed by the first century B.C. On the other hand, the present village of Askar dates from medieval times and while tradition links the village to Sychar, a geographical link is uncertain.⁵ In either case, those who lived in Sychar at the time of Jesus were but a small remnant of the larger population that had inhabited the area more than a century earlier.

I personally am struck by the hardships of everyday life that the Samaritan woman endured. I grew up in rural Virginia. We had running water that came from a natural spring. During occasional winter ice storms, when the power failed, we had to trek through the ice and snow to carry buckets of water back from the spring, a distance of

bucket were cutting through my gloves into my half-frozen fingers. If the identification of Sychar is Shechem, then this woman carried the water more than a quarter of a mile up the ravine between the mountains to her home. On the other hand, if Sychar was the sight where present-day Askar is located, then the woman was required to carry water a full mile.

The Samaritan Holy Mountain

Finally, the location of the well at the foot of Mount Gerizim lends itself to the conversation between Jesus, the Jewish teacher, and the Samaritan woman about the “true” place of worship. The temple of the Samaritans had been built on the summit of Mount Gerizim in the fourth century B.C. During the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Samaritans renamed the temple Zeus.⁶ John Hyrcanus, the Jewish governor and priest, hated the Samaritans and destroyed their Zeus temple in 128 B.C.

Sitting on Jacob's well in sight of the Samaritan holy place, Jesus offered the Samaritan woman the true refreshment of living water and a true theology of the worship that transcended both Jewish and Samaritan notions of the proper place for the worship of God. **B**

1. I had the pleasure of teaching a weeklong course on the Bible to an audience of Jews and Christians with Rabbi Panitz in Norfolk, Virginia several years ago. With some humor, we suggested that the oldest pick-up line in history was, “Can you give me a drink of water?” If the woman was interested, she would reply, “Yes, and let me water your camel, too.” Once this context of meeting place is grasped, the shocked reply of the Samaritan woman to Jesus' request for water (“How is it that you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for water?”) may be understood with perfect clarity.

2. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 36 (Waco: Word, 1987), 59.

3. Zdravko Stefanovic, “Jacob's Well” in *The Anchor Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3 (New York, Doubleday, 1992), 608-609.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11, The New American Commentary*, vol. 25A (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 201.

6. Jeffrey K. Lott, “Gerizim, Mount of” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 993.

John Mason is pastor, Woodlawn Baptist Church, Colonial Heights, Virginia.

LESSON REFERENCE

FBSC: John 4:1-45