

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

4:1-6

1. Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, 2. (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but his disciples), 3. He left Judæa and departed again to Galilee. 4. But He needed to go through Samaria. 5. So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. 6. Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from *His* journey, sat thus on the well. It was about the sixth hour.

1.--[*Therefore...Pharisees...than John.*] The connection between this chapter and the last will be found at the 25th verse of the last chapter. The controversy between John's disciples and the Jews was the means of calling public attention to our Lord's ministry. It became a subject of common conversation and attracted the notice of the principal religious teachers of the Jews: viz., the Pharisees. They had been already disturbed by the ministry of John the Baptist and the crowds which attended it. (John i.19-28.) The deputation which they sent to John had been distinctly told by him that One greater than himself was about to appear. When therefore "the Pharisees heard" that Jesus was actually baptizing more disciples and attracting more attention than John, we can well imagine that their minds would be even more disturbed than before. A vague, uncomfortable feeling would arise in their hearts that this mysterious person, who had cast out of the temple the buyers and sellers in so miraculous a manner and was now baptizing so many disciples, might possibly be the Christ. And then would come the attendant feeling that if this was the Christ, He was not the Christ they either expected or wanted. The result of both feelings would probably be a bitter enmity against our Lord, and a secret determination, if possible, to settle all doubts by putting Him to death.

In what manner our Lord "knew" what the Pharisees had heard, we need not be careful to inquire. Possibly He knew it from information obtained by His disciples. We can hardly doubt that some of them kept up intercourse with their old master, John the Baptist, and so learned what was going on at *Ænon*. It is more probable that He knew it from His omniscience as God. We are frequently told that "he knew the thoughts" of His enemies, and acted and spoke accordingly. It is good for us all to remember that nothing is spoken, talked of, or reported among men, however secretly, which Christ does not know.

2.--[*Though Jesus...baptize...disciples.*] The fact that our Lord did not actually administer baptism with His own hands is only mentioned here in the Gospels and is noteworthy. It shows, at any rate, that what is done by Christ's ministers, at Christ's command, in the administration of ordinances is regarded as done by Christ Himself. The preceding verse says that "Jesus baptized" while the present one says that He "did not baptize." Lightfoot remarks: "It is ordinary, both in Scripture phrase and in other

language, to speak of a thing as done by a man himself which is done by another at his appointment. So Pharaoh's daughter is said to 'nurse Moses,' and Solomon is said to 'build the temple and his own house.' So David 'took Saul's spear and cruse,' meaning Abishai by David's appointment.'" (1 Sam. xxvi.12.)

The reasons assigned for our Lord's not administering baptism with His own hands are various. Lightfoot mentions four. (1) "Because He was not sent so much to baptize as to preach. (2) Because it might have been taken as a thing somewhat improper for Christ to baptize in His own name. (3) Because the baptizing that was most proper for Christ to use was not with water but with the Holy Ghost. (4) Because He would prevent all quarrels and disputes among men about their baptism, which might have risen if some had been baptized by Christ and others only by His disciples."

To these reasons we may add another of considerable importance. Our Lord would show us that the effect and benefit of baptism did not depend on the person who administers it. We cannot doubt that Judas Iscariot baptized some. The intention of the minister does not affect the validity of the sacrament.

One thing seems abundantly clear, and that is, that baptism is not an ordinance of primary but of subordinate importance in Christianity. The high-flown and extravagant language used by some divines about the sacrament of baptism and its effects is quite irreconcilable with the text before us, as well as with the general teaching of Scripture. (See Acts x.48; 1 Cor. i.17.)

2.--[*He left Judæa, etc.*] The context of the preceding verses seems to show that this movement was intended to avoid the designs of the Pharisees against our Lord. If He had remained in Judæa, he would have been cut off and put to death before the appointed time. He therefore withdrew into the province of Galilee where He was further off from Jerusalem, and where His ministry would attract less public notice.

Our Lord's conduct on this occasion shows us that it is not obligatory on a Christian to await danger to life and person, when he sees it coming, and that it is not cowardice to use all reasonable means to avoid it. We are not to court martyrdom or needlessly throw our lives away. There is a time for all things--a time to live and work as well as a time to suffer and to die. Whether some of the primitive martyrs would have acted as our Lord did here may be questioned. Their zeal for martyrdom seems sometimes to have partaken of the character of fanaticism.

[*He needed...Samaria.*] Many pious and profitable remarks have been made on this expression. It has been thought to teach that our Lord went purposely and out of the regular road in order to save the soul of the Samaritan woman. It admits of grave question whether this opinion is well-rounded. There was no other way by which a person could conveniently go from Judæa to Galilee, excepting through Samaria. The expression, therefore, is probably nothing more than a natural introduction to the story of the

Samaritan woman. The first in the train of circumstances which led to her conversion was the circumstance that Jesus was obliged to pass through Samaria on His journey towards Galilee. This accounted for His meeting with a Samaritan woman.

5.--[*Came to a city...Sychar.*] The common opinion is that the city here spoken of is the same as Sichem or Shechem. (Gen. xxxiii.18,19.) Few places in Palestine, after Jerusalem, have had so much of Bible history connected with them. Here God first appeared to Abraham. (Gen. xii.6.) Here Jacob dwelt when he first returned from Padan-aram, and here the disgraceful history of Dinah and the consequent murder of the Shechemites took place. (Gen. xxxiv.2, etc.) Here Joseph's brethren fed their flocks when Jacob sent him to them, little thinking he would not see him again for many years. (Gen. xxxvii.12.) Here, when Israel took possession of the land of Canaan, was one of the cities of refuge. (Josh. xx.7,8.) Here Joshua gathered all the tribes when he addressed them for the last time. (Josh. xxiv.1.) Here the bones of Joseph were buried and all the patriarchs were interred. (Josh. xxiv.32; Acts vii. 16.) Here the principal events in the history of Abimelech took place. (Judges ix.1, etc.) Here Rehoboam met the tribes of Israel after Solomon's death and gave the answer which rent his kingdom in two. (1 Kings xii.1.) Here Jeroboam first dwelt when he was made King of Israel. (1 Kings xii.25.) And finally, close by Shechem was the city Samaria itself and the two hills of Ebal and Gerizim, where the solemn blessings and cursings were recited after Israel entered Canaan. (Josh. viii.33.) A more interesting neighborhood it is difficult to imagine. Whichever way the eye of a wearied traveler looked, he would see something to remind him of Israel's history.

It is only fair to say that one of the latest travelers in Palestine (Dr. Thomson, author of "The Land and the Book"), doubts whether Sychar and Shechem really were the same place. He grounds his doubt on the fact that the well now called Jacob's well is two miles from the ruins of Shechem, and that close to these ruins are beautiful fountains of water. He thinks it highly improbable that a woman of Shechem would go two miles to draw water if she could find it close by. He therefore thinks it more likely that a place now called Aschar, which is close to Jacob's well, must be the ancient Sychar, and that Sychar and Shechem were two different places.

The subject is one on which it is impossible to attain a conclusive decision. Whether the ruins now called the ruins of Shechem are really on the site of ancient Shechem--whether the well now called Jacob's well is really the well spoken of in this chapter--whether ancient Shechem may not have been nearer the well that it now appears, are all points on which, after eighteen hundred years have passed away, it is impossible to speak positively. It ought, however, to be remembered that the opinion of most competent judges is almost entirely against Dr. Thomason's theory. Moreover, it is worth noticing that the Samaritan woman's words, "Neither come hither to draw," seem to imply that she had to come some distance to Jacob's well when she drew water.

[*Near the parcel...Joseph.*] The ground here spoken of seems to consist of two parts. One part was bought by Jacob of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred pieces of silver. (Gen. xxxiii.29.) The other seems to have been his by conquest, when his sons slew the Shechemites for dishonoring Dinah. (Gen. xxxiv.28, and xlvi.22.)

Let it be carefully noted that St. John here speaks of Jacob and Joseph and the events of their lives as if the history contained in Genesis was all simple matter of fact. It is always so in the New Testament. The modern theory, that the histories of the Old Testament are only fables destitute of any foundation in fact, is a mere baseless invention without a single respectable argument to be adduced in its favor.

6.--[*Jacob's well.*] It is not known how or when this well received its name. In Genesis we find mention of Abraham and Isaac digging wells, but not of Jacob doing so. All we know about it is what we read in the chapter before us.

A well called Jacob's well is still shown to all travelers in Palestine, near the ruins of Shechem, and is commonly supposed to be one of the oldest and most genuine remains of ancient times in the Holy Land. In fact, there seems no reason for disputing the common belief that it is the very identical well at which our Lord sat and held the conversation recorded in this chapter. It is in good preservation, and about thirty yards deep.

[*Wearied from His journey.*] This expression deserves notice. It shows the reality of our Lord's human nature. He had a body like our own, subject to all the conditions of flesh and blood. It shows our Lord's infinite compassion, humility, and condescension when He became flesh and came on earth to live and die for our sins. Though He was rich, He became poor. He who had made the world, and whose were "the cattle on a thousand hills," was content to be a weary traveler on foot in order to provide eternal redemption for us. We never read of Jesus traveling in a carriage, and only once of His riding on a beast. It supplies the poor with the strongest argument for contentment. If Christ was willing to be poor, we may surely be willing to submit to poverty. Men need not be ashamed of poverty, if they have not brought it on themselves by misconduct. It is disgraceful to be profligate and immoral. But it is no sin to be poor. Finally, it shows believers what a sympathizing Saviour Christ is. He knows what it is to have a weak and weary body. He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. When our work wearies us, though we are not weary of our work, we may confidently tell Jesus and ask Him for help. He knows the heart of a weary man.

[*Sat thus on the well.*] The general meaning of these words is that our Lord sat down on the stones which, according to Eastern custom, formed a wall or battlement around the mouth of the well. The particular meaning of the word "thus" in the sentence is a point that has perplexed commentators in every age, and will perhaps never be settled.

Some think, as DeDieu, A. Clarke, and Schleusner, that "thus" is a

pleonasm, or elegant expletive and redundancy in the Greek original, and that although a Greek would see a meaning in it, as giving a finish to the sentence, it has no special meaning that can be attached to it in the English translation.

Some think, as Chrysostom, Theophylact, Euthymius, Musculus, Bengel, Glassius, and Wordsworth, that "thus" means "just as He was," without any regular seat, without looking for any convenient position, without any pride or formality; not upon a throne, not upon a cushion, but simply upon the ground.

Some think, as Doddridge, that "thus" means immediately, and find a parallel for it in Acts xx.11.

Some think, as Calvin, Lightfoot, Dyke, Bullinger, Beza, Parkhurst, Stier, Alford, and Burgon, that "thus" refers to the weariness just mentioned. Jesus, being wearied, sat down on the well accordingly, after the manner and according to the fashion that any weary person would sit. He was weary, and *so* He sat on the well.

The question is one that I feel unable to settle. The last meaning seems to me, on the whole, the most probable one, though it fails to carry complete conviction with it. The use of the word "so," in Acts vii.8, is somewhat like it. The Greek word for "so" in that case is the same as the one here rendered "thus."

Burgon remarks on this sentence, "that Jacob and Moses each found his future wife beside a well of water; and here it is seen that One greater than they, their Divine Antitype, the Bridegroom, takes to Himself His alien spouse, the Samaritan Church, at a well likewise.

Quesnel remarks, "The rest of Jesus Christ is as mysterious and full of kindness and beneficence as His weariness. It is a great matter for a man to learn how to rest himself without being idle, and to make his necessary repose subservient to the glory of God."

[*It was about the sixth hour.*] What time of the day was this, according to our calculation of time? By far the most common opinion is that the sixth hour here means twelve o'clock, the hottest and sultriest time of the day. It is notorious that the Jewish day began at six o'clock, and their sixth hour would be our twelve o'clock.

It is, however, only just and right to say that some commentators, as Wordsworth and Burgon, maintain strongly that in St. John's Gospel the Jewish mode of reckoning the hours of the day is not observed. They say that, writing later than the other Evangelists and in Asia Minor, St. John uses the Roman or Asiatic mode of reckoning time, and that the Roman mode was like our own. They say, therefore, that when the disciples followed Jesus (John i.39) at the tenth hour, it was ten o'clock in the morning; and when the fever left the ruler's son at the seventh hour, it was seven o'clock in the evening. (John iv.52.) They say that when Pilate brought

forth Jesus to the Jews on the day of the crucifixion at the sixth hour (John xix.14), it was six o'clock in the morning. And finally, they say that when Jesus, in the passage before us, sat wearied on the well at the sixth hour, it means six o'clock in the evening. Moreover, they plead in support of their view that it is infinitely more likely that a woman would come to a well to draw water at six o'clock in the evening than at twelve o'clock in the day. In Genesis it is distinctly said that the "evening" is the "time that women go out to draw water." (Gen. xxiv.11.)

These arguments are undoubtedly weighty and ingenious, and the matter is one that admits of doubt. Nevertheless, for several reasons I am disposed to think that the common view of the question is the correct one, and that the sixth hour in this place means twelve o'clock in the day. I purposely omit the consideration of the other places where St. John mentions hours in his Gospel. None of them seem to me to present any difficulty, except the "sixth hour" in St. John's account of the crucifixion. That difficulty I shall be prepared to examine in its proper place. I think then that the "sixth hour" in the text before us means twelve o'clock, for the following reasons:

(a) It seems exceedingly improbable that St. John would reckon time in a manner different to the other three Gospel writers.

(b) It is by no means clear that the Romans did reckon time in our way and not in the Jewish way. When the Roman poet Horace describes himself as lying late in bed in a morning, he says, "I lie till the fourth hour." He must surely mean ten o'clock and not four in the afternoon. When the Roman poet Martial describes the Roman day, he says, "The first and second hours are employed by clients in attending levees, and the third hour exercises the advocates in the law courts." He surely cannot mean that Roman law courts did not open till two o'clock in the afternoon. About the custom of the Asiatics I offer no opinion. It is a doubtful point.

(c) It is entirely a gratuitous assumption to say that no woman ever came to draw water except in the evening. There must surely be exceptions to every rule. The fact of the woman coming *alone*, seems of itself to indicate that she came at an unusual hour and not in the evening.

(d) Last, but not least, it seems far more probable that our Lord would hold a conversation alone with such a person as the Samaritan woman at twelve o'clock in the day than at six o'clock in the evening. The conversation was not a very short one. There is little or no twilight in Eastern countries. The night soon comes on. And yet, on the theory I oppose, our Lord begins a conversation about six o'clock and carries it on till the woman is converted. Then the woman goes away to the city and tells the men what has happened, and they all come out to the well to see Jesus. Yet by this time, in all reasonable probability, it would be quite dark, and the night would have begun. And yet, after all this, our Lord says to the disciples, "Lift up your eyes and look on the fields." (iv.35.)

This last reason weighs very heavily in my mind in forming a conclusion on

the subject. Our Lord appears to me to have reached a resting-place for the middle of the day, according to the Eastern custom in traveling, and to have intended staying by the well for a short time, until the heat of the day was past. The arrival of the Samaritan woman at this hour of the day gave ample time for the conversation, for her rapid return to the city, and for the coming of the inhabitants to the well.

I must say that I see a peculiar beauty and fitness in the mention of the sixth hour, if it means twelve o'clock, which I should not see so strongly if it meant six in the evening. To my eyes there is a special seemliness and propriety in the fact that our Lord held His conversation with such a person as the Samaritan woman at noonday. When he talked to Nicodemus, in the preceding chapter, we are told that it was at night. But when He talked to a woman of impure life, we are carefully told that it was twelve o'clock in the day. I see in this fact a beautiful carefulness to avoid even the appearance of evil, which I should entirely miss if the sixth hour meant six o'clock in the evening. I see even more than this. I see a lesson to all ministers and teachers of the Gospel about the right mode of carrying on the work of trying to do good to souls like that of the Samaritan woman. Like their Master, they must be careful about times and hours, and specially if they work alone. If a man will try to do good to a person like the Samaritan woman, alone and without witnesses, let him take heed that he walks in his Master's footsteps, both as to the time of his proceedings as well as to the message he delivers. I believe there was a deep meaning in the little sentence, "It was about the sixth hour."

Augustine thinks that "the sixth hour" here was meant to represent, allegorically, the sixth age of the world. He says that the first hour was from Adam to Noah, the second from Noah to Abraham, the third from Abraham to David, the fourth from David to the Babylonian captivity, the fourth from the captivity to the baptism of John, and the sixth the time of the Lord Jesus. I can see no foundation for these things in the text. If such interpretations of Scripture are correct, it is easy to make the Bible mean anything.