

In spirit and in truth

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.”

John 4:21-23

Constricted by the mental hoops of standard shadow and covenant theory, many see this passage as hailing a welcome end to primitive temple worship. Jesus, they claim, proclaimed the death of temple worship in tandem with His own death and the initiation of the new covenant. And not a minute too soon, thank you. In this new era of spiritual worship, temple worship would be meaningless. Adam Clarke put it this way:

The time was now at hand in which the spiritual worship of God was about to be established in the earth, and all the Jewish rites and ceremonies entirely abolished (ed. Earle 1967).

How sound is this idea? Analysis shows that Jesus was saying no such thing. Rather, He was announcing that His imminent crucifixion and resurrection would cut the ribbon for a new harvest of true worshipers for the **kingdom of God** (vss. 34-38), one that would include Gentile Samaritans as well as Israelites.

Let's try to understand the thread of His thought. Though speaking with dogmatic confidence about the precise meaning of Jesus' words would be foolish, we can, through a process of elimination, have a fair idea. We will begin by showing what He did *not* mean when He downplayed the importance of the two temple-capped mountains, Mt Gerizim and Jerusalem.

Neither Mt Gerizim nor Jerusalem

Jesus was *not* saying that:

- ... worship at those sites would cease due to the destruction of their respective temples. The Samaritan temple at Mt Gerizim had been destroyed over 150 years earlier. Further, it was rebuilt less than one hundred years later.
- ... temple worship was pointless and must cease forthwith. He constantly upheld the sanctity of the temple and the validity of its rites. He even participated in its worship (ed. Douglas 1980, p. 1656). He ate the Passover lamb, sacrificed at the temple, with the prescribed bitter herbs. The New Testament gives no indication that the church ever

taught Christians against participating in such ceremonies; church members even undertook voluntary **Nazirite** vows with their attendant sacrifices at the temple (Acts 21:23).

- ... worship “in spirit and truth” had never existed before. The Old Testament, particularly the book of Psalms, is replete with examples of Spirit-led worship, some at the temple and some, such as Psalm 42, many miles removed.
- ... worship “in spirit and truth” and worship at the temple are mutually exclusive. Spirit-led worshipers of old, such as King David, not only worshiped enthusiastically at the temple but also worshiped in the privacy of their own palace or tent or under desert stars. The Old Testament never portrays the Jerusalem temple as the only place where members of the covenant community could worship properly.

Before we can draw any conclusions about the meaning of Jesus' words concerning temple worship, we need to determine His train of thought in this passage. His other statements provide clues enabling us to do just that.

Salvation is of the Jews

Admittedly, Jesus' remark that Jews know whom they worship (while Samaritans do not) because “salvation is of [from] the Jews” presents as many interpretive difficulties as the temple-worship observation. Many take the phrase to mean nothing more than that the Savior would come from the tribe of Judah. However, if that is what Christ meant, He could so easily have said “the savior is of the Jews”. Carson (1991, p. 223) says, “Nor does it simply mean that the promised deliverer... would come from Judah...” So what does it mean? And was that circumstance about to change, as some think?

Though the New Testament makes abundantly clear that Gentiles do not have to become Israelites in order to enjoy God's salvation, it does support the Old Testament teaching that Gentiles would come to God, and thereby to salvation, *through* Israel. One of the most profound expressions of this truth can be found in the prophecy of Zechariah 8:23:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: “In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’ “

The latter chapters of Isaiah describe both Israel's Messiah and Israel herself as God's “servant” through whom salvation would come “to the ends of the earth” (Is. 49:6). Jesus is the grounds of salvation, Israel its broker. Exactly how Israel aids the salvation process

in the era of the church is beyond the scope of this publication. Most people's personal experience today would seem to deny that they in any way depend on the house of Israel in their relationship with God. Be that as it may, Paul, in a highly complex section of Scripture, corroborates the principle:

For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root [patriarchs] is holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches [of Israel] were broken off, and you [Gentiles], being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you (Rom. 11:16-18).

So salvation is still "of the Jews". God assigned them, with all Israelite tribes, to be a "kingdom of priests" to minister to Gentile peoples, teaching them about their Messiah and the salvation that He alone provides. That circumstance was not about to change. Samaritans would need Israelitish assistance and guidance in their quest to enjoy the saving benefits of Israel's Messiah.

Worship in spirit and truth

What is worship "in spirit and truth" all about? Since much has been written about the meaning of this phrase, with wide variations in interpretation, caution is advised against dogmatic assertions. Ladd's explanation, though, makes a lot of sense (1974, p. 292). He points out that "spirit" worship refers to worship motivated and guided by the Holy Spirit rather than to inner "spiritual" worship as opposed to mechanical rites. Since God is spirit, He cannot be limited to any one place, be it Jerusalem or Gerizim. The Holy Spirit enables men to worship God anywhere. (Jews understood this point; Samaritans did not.)

Ladd adds that "truth" relates to the Old Testament idea of God's faithfulness to Himself, "and therefore it refers to what God is doing in the coming of Jesus". The Holy Spirit inspires worship, but Jesus, the promised seed of blessing, is the mediator of worship (Heb. 4:15-16). Worship "in truth" is thus synonymous with worship "in Spirit". Someone motivated by the Holy Spirit and having access to God through his heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, can worship God acceptably anywhere, and in various ways.

Putting it all together

Let's try to understand this vital passage. Consider these points:

- Jesus' words show that temple worship was about to be "overtaken" by Spirit-led, Jesus-mediated worship. Based on points raised above, this change should not be seen as the replacement of temple wor-

ship by spirit worship or the demise of temple worship's value.

- Some Samaritans would soon begin to worship God in spirit, no longer limiting worship to their temple.
- This new blessing about to be enjoyed by Samaritans was in some way contingent upon Jewish mediation.

Let's put it all together. Before Jesus came, Israel was locked up under the old covenant. That covenant, shutting Israel away from access to believing faith, was imposed on Israel due to her rebellion against God after their **redemption** from Egypt. Some very few "true worshipers" in Israel, and an even smaller number of Gentiles, worshiped God in spirit and truth, walking and talking with Him in their everyday lives regardless of their geographical location. But the majority did not. As a result, Israel failed to fulfil her commission to take the truth of God to other nations, including Samaria. All that was about to change. Jesus was about to usher in the new covenant, releasing Israel from the old covenant's condemning grip, freeing her to enjoy an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost in 31 AD, three thousand Jews were converted.

Now the critical point. This development would have ripple effects on Samaritans and other Gentiles. Some Jews would begin to fulfil their God-given commission to take the gospel to others. Exactly that began to happen just a few years after Jesus' death and resurrection, with the apostle Paul serving as the spearhead. As a result, Samaritans and other Gentiles began to receive the same gifts, and to be grafted into the same olive tree, as Israelites. Whereas before then all Samaritans thought God could only be worshiped at their temple, after Calvary some began to worship Him in spirit and truth elsewhere.

What "the coming hour" was about to bring was not a new form of worship, for God had had true worshipers from the beginning, but a new era in which "all flesh", both Israelite and Gentile, could have unlimited worshipful access to God through Christ and assisted by the Holy Spirit. They would not restrict their worship exclusively to the temple. This new era, in which untold thousands worship God in the time-honored way of "spirit and truth" in no way abolishes those rites and ceremonies that for centuries acted as shadows of His coming and work, and which were so understood by saints of old. Were a temple standing now, God's servants would be free to avail themselves of the extra benefits its shadow service provided. But a true worshiper today can have, just as true worshipers of Old Testament times could, a dynamic, living, healthy relationship with God without ever setting foot in the temple.