

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

*STUDIES IN THE "INNER LIFE" OF JESUS.*

IX.

THE SCOPE OF THE MINISTRY.

1. IN fulfilment of His vocation as the Jewish Messiah Jesus had presented Himself in Jerusalem, but He found the leaders and teachers not prepared to welcome Him. His acceptance among the people He could not rely on, as their belief in Him rested solely on the witness of His miracles to His power. A further and fuller work of preparation had to be done; and, therefore, He, instead of entering at once on His own independent ministry, for a time continued the labours of the Baptist, His herald and forerunner. Yet even this effort threatened to hasten the conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities, which He knew to be inevitable, but which He desired to delay till His hour had come. Accordingly He withdrew to Galilee, probably with no definite intention to exercise a public ministry there, but desiring in retirement and quietness to wait His Father's leading. As He was passing through Samaria, His talk with the woman at the well opened the door of opportunity for a brief ministry. This incident presents for our consideration one of the most interesting and important problems of His life, *the Scope of His Ministry*.

2. Did Jesus think of Himself as the Messiah of the Jewish people only, or as also the Saviour of all mankind? If the former, was not Paul wrong in preaching the gospel to the Gentiles? If the latter, why did He as a rule restrict His efforts to Jews, and assume, with only a few exceptions, an attitude of aloofness to the Gentiles? As proofs of the view that Jesus regarded Himself as Jewish Messiah only, the following sayings have been quoted.

When he sent forth the twelve disciples on their first mission, He commanded them. "Go not into any way of the Gentiles; and enter not into any city of the Samaritans; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. x. 5-6). Twice He refused to cure the daughter of the Syro-phoenician woman in words which seem to express the narrowest Jewish exclusiveness. "I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to the dogs" (Matt. xv. 24, 26). Thrice in the Sermon on the Mount He expressed His disapproval of the limitation of the affections, the repetitions in the prayers, and the worldliness of the desires of the Gentiles (Matt. v. 47, vi. 7, 32). Regarding an erring brother He laid down the rule: "Let him be to thee as the Gentile and the publican" (Matt. xviii. 17). This evidence is not conclusive, as these sayings are capable of being explained without any such assumption. The spiritual immaturity of the disciples afforded sufficient reason for their being sent only to their fellow-countrymen, with whose opinions and sentiments they were already familiar, and in dealing with whom they would have much less difficulty than with strangers. Their racial and religious prejudices also made them unfit for a wider mission. Jesus' treatment of the Syro-phoenician woman is in connexion with the present subject of such crucial significance that it must at a later stage of this discussion receive more thorough consideration. The statements in the Sermon on the Mount deal with plain facts, and show no hostile attitude, but a friendly interest. His treatment of a publican shows what His treatment of a Gentile would be. He was called "the friend of publicans and sinners," and He called a publican to be a disciple. In advising that the erring brother should be treated as a publican or Gentile, we may be sure He intended not contemptuous indifference, but tender and earnest solicitude.

3. As evidence of the largeness of the sympathy of Jesus may be mentioned many words and deeds. He revealed Himself as Messiah to the Samaritan woman. He presented for admiration and imitation a Samaritan as an example of a true neighbour (Luke x. 33). He praised the gratitude of the Samaritan leper, who "returned to give glory to God" for his cure (Luke xvii. 18). He severely rebuked His disciples who desired to call down fire on the Samaritan village which refused to receive them. "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of" (Luke ix. 55). Of the Roman centurion's faith He declared, "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Matt. viii. 10). How gladly He welcomed the Syro-phoenician mother's witty answer: "O woman, great is thy faith" (Matt. xv. 28). The request of the Greeks at the feast drew from Him one of His most sublime and profound utterances (John xii. 20-24). The taunts of His enemies, that He was a Samaritan, and that He might preach to the Greeks (John vii. 35, viii. 48), gain significance, if not random shafts of malice, but deliberate charges, having some excuse in His treatment of Gentiles and Samaritans. Specially suggestive in helping us to define Jesus' conception of the scope of His ministry are His work in Samaria, His praise of the Gentile centurion and mother, and His address to the Greeks; and each of these incidents will now claim our closer study.

4. The arrangement of the Gospel of John probably gives to the ministry in Samaria (iv. 1-42) a greater prominence than actually belonged to it. It was not a part of any plan formed by Jesus. He went through Samaria, because there ran the shortest road from Jerusalem to Galilee. He sat down at the well, because He was weary. He asked for water, because He was thirsty. He, a Jew, spoke to her, a Samaritan, not because He meant to break down the barriers of racial and religious prejudice, but because His

large and free affection ignored these divisions among men, unless these were forced on His notice. In all these facts there was, however, Divine guidance. If we try to recover the connecting links in the conversation, we shall see how spontaneously, without calculation, Jesus was led step by step to His work in Samaria, which did not strictly belong to His vocation as Jewish Messiah, but proved an anticipation of the world-wide significance of His work as Saviour.

5. The woman herself forced on His attention the prejudices which divided Jew and Samaritan. That challenge of His action evoked the consciousness of the common spiritual needs of mankind, and of the satisfaction which He knew Himself capable of giving to them. The woman's persistent bigotry only strengthened in Him the desire to awaken in her, and then to still, the longings which belong to the human soul, whether Jewish or Samaritan. Although her intelligence was not enlightened, yet her interest was aroused, and, breaking the fetters of her exclusiveness, and yielding to the spell of His generosity, she desired the gift He offered. At this point He gave the conversation an unexpected direction in the command, "Go, call thy husband, and come hither." What reason can be found for this sudden change? If we are to infer the intention from the effect of the words, then there can be no doubt that the command was an appeal to the woman's conscience as a necessary preparation of the revelation of His grace. He meant her to face her sinful past, so that there might be awakened in her the craving for the forgiveness and the cleansing, which was the boon He wanted to bestow upon her.

6. This explanation necessarily assumes that Jesus knew so much of the woman's life as to be sure that the command would arouse her sense of guilt. His interest in her spiritual condition, and His desire to confer on her His

salvation, had called into exercise His capacity, at other times quiescent, of supernatural insight into the thoughts and feelings of those with whom He was dealing. But in recognizing such a power in Him, we must try to define its range. Did He know the whole inner history of those, the secrets of whose hearts were thus discovered to Him, or did there come to Him only an intuition of their thoughts and feelings at the moment of their converse with Him? On the broad ground of asserting as constantly and completely as possible His perfect humanity, His subjection to our limitations, in short, the reality of the Incarnation, the more probable conclusion is, that by this supernatural insight He only discovered as much of the inner life as was necessary for effectual spiritual dealing. There was without outward communication a transference to His consciousness of the contents of the consciousness of the person with whom He was in conversation. Accordingly the command would imply, that already the conscience of the woman had been aroused and her spirit troubled by the presence and appeal of Jesus. She was already anxiously pondering what He would think of her relationship, when His words startled her into confession. She did not reveal all her thoughts, but His answer showed her that none was hidden from Him. The exact number of the husbands from whom she had been divorced appears at first sight so trivial a detail, that it is more difficult to believe that the knowledge of it was included in His supernatural insight than to assume that His statement was general, and that the woman in reporting it made it so definite. But if the woman herself, as she stood before Him, was reviewing her own past life, and thinking in turn of the wrongs she had done her husbands, and if His supernatural insight consisted of a clear and full intuition of what was passing through another mind, then even the inclusion of this detail becomes intelligible and credible. Trivial it may seem to us, but to

the woman it was of great importance, and for that reason doubtless Jesus mentioned it. This miraculous endowment was not exercised in vain, for it led the woman to recognize His prophetic authority. Since He did exercise this power, and did not rely on His usual means of instruction and influence, we are justified in concluding that only thus could her submission to His efforts to save her be secured.

7. The conversation again assumes an unexpected direction. The woman, conscience-stricken, does not seek the assurance of forgiveness, or the means of escape from her sinful state, probably because she had no hope of help from the prophet whom she saw in Jesus. She tries to get away from this painful personal dealing to the discussion of a question which could neither hurt nor heal any conscience. Her revival of the old dispute between Jew and Samaritan about the acceptable place of worship led Him to that sublime and profound utterance (23-24) in which He declares the spiritual Fatherhood of God, the spirituality and sincerity of the worship which He requires, and consequently the removal of all local limitations in His worship. It is noteworthy how the bigotry of the woman at each stage of the conversation evoked in Him an ever fuller and clearer expression of spiritual universalism, surely an evidence of His freedom from, and antagonism to, all religious exclusiveness. Yet this statement is immediately preceded by words which seem at first sight to express very definitely and aggressively Jewish particularism. "Ye worship that which ye know not: we worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews." If we look more closely at the words we shall be led to correct our first impression. The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch as the revelation of God, and cut off their religious thought and life from the illumination and inspiration of the prophetic literature. They clung to an inadequate, and cast

off a more adequate conception. The conception which Jesus had just expressed was rooted in His own consciousness, and yet it had been in some measure anticipated by the teaching of the prophets, and in some degree the development of even His own consciousness had been stimulated by the study of the prophets. Jesus was simply stating a plain fact, the assertion of which was necessary to rebuke the prejudice and bigotry of the woman, and to secure her attention to, and her acceptance of, the teaching which He, a Jew, was giving to her. Further, the Samaritans did expect a Messiah, a prophet like unto Moses, who would deal with such ritual questions as the proper place of worship. But what she needed was a Saviour from sin. The prophets, whose teaching the Jews accepted, and the Samaritans rejected, contained the promise of such a salvation. It was this promise that Jesus knew He had come to fulfil, and He wanted to turn the thoughts of the woman away from all ritual questions, such as were in dispute between Jew and Samaritan, to the moral and religious question of salvation, of which the Jewish Scriptures had more to tell than the Samaritan. He recognized her claim to this salvation; and that He might bestow this gift upon her, He corrected what was defective in her thoughts and wishes. When she showed her readiness to accept the Messiah's teaching, whatever it might be, whether contrary to, or accordant with, her own opinions and desires, He confessed His Messiahship. This then was not a secret which He jealously guarded, but a revelation which He gladly and readily made, whenever He found a soil ready for the seed. This woman cherished the expectation of the Messiah. She had been awakened to a sense of her need of the salvation, which the Messiah was to bring. She evidently could be helped only by the certainty that the Messiah Himself was offering her His salvation. Therefore Jesus



met the need which He Himself had awakened to consciousness.

8. Not only the woman, but many others in the town of Sychar readily responded to the appeal of Jesus. His words to His disciples show His surprise that the harvest which they had a share in the joy of reaping should have followed so quickly on His own sowing of the seed in the heart of the woman, for which the soil had been far better prepared by her imperfect Samaritan beliefs than even He could have anticipated. The life of Jesus was full of bitter disappointments, and had few glad surprises. This ministry in Samaria was one of these. But its success raises two questions, to which we must seek some answer. Why did Jesus not continue His ministry longer, when its first results so exceeded His expectations? How is it that we do not hear in the later history of the effects of this effort among the Samaritans? The 39th verse at least suggests that the belief of many in Samaria as in Judæa rested on no solid foundation. If many Judeans believed, because they beheld "the signs which He did," many Samaritans believed "because of the word of the woman, who testified, He told me all things that ever I did." Although their personal contact with Jesus gave them fresh reasons for their faith, yet it does not seem to have transformed its essential character. Jesus could not place much reliance on a faith due to astonishment at His supernatural insight. Although he had found so great a readiness to respond to His appeal, yet He could not find that thorough preparedness of mind and heart among the Samaritans which He could look for among the few in Israel, who were waiting for "the redemption of Jerusalem." That during the brief span of His earthly ministry He might awaken the faith of those who were prepared to receive Him as Saviour and Lord, it was needful that He should concentrate His efforts on "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Probably

the Samaritan field did not prove as fruitful as it at first appeared, and at least did not justify His withdrawal from the people, to whom, according to God's call, He had first been sent.

9. That the sympathy, interest, and affection of Jesus were not confined to the Jewish people, and that there was nevertheless an imperative necessity for restricting His ministry to it, is confirmed by other incidents. His commendation of the faith of the Roman centurion seems to throw some more light on the question. First of all it illustrates the largeness of His heart. The condition of the Gentiles, viewed even by His most sympathetic eye, held out little promise of spiritual capacity or excellence. Before He could have sowed the seed of the gospel among the Gentiles much labour in getting ready the soil would have been needed. He, therefore, did not attempt to address His ministry to the Gentiles with whom He came into contact. If, however, He met with any signs of spiritual discernment and aspiration in a Gentile, how ready He was to recognize their worth and to express their praise! The very severity of the judgment which He was compelled by facts to pronounce on the condition of the Gentiles threw into clearer and bolder relief this appreciation of the excellence of Gentile faith when as in this case He met with it. "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Matt. viii. 10). Secondly, if we inquire what there was, in the faith of the centurion, that was so highly approved by Jesus, we may get a suggestion of the reason why He thus restricted His ministry. Some hold that what surprised and pleased Him in the centurion's words was the belief expressed in His power to heal at a distance without His bodily presence. But this explanation, itself improbable, ignores two important points in the speech. The centurion is giving a reason why Jesus should not come under his roof. That He could work a

miracle at a distance is of course a reason why He should not take the trouble to go to the centurion's house. But it does not seem to be the sole reason in the centurion's mind. He recognizes as a reason that Jesus, as a Jew, might be unwilling to enter the house of a Gentile. (Compare the narrative of Peter's visit to Cornelius.) This is the first point ignored in this explanation. The second is this. The centurion confesses himself a man *under* as well as *in* authority. He ascribes to Jesus an authority over disease, but does not he also suggest that even He is under authority, and can exercise it only as He submits to it. While He can command disease, and it will obey Him, yet He Himself is under a command to do His work among Jews, being Himself a Jew. Any favour He may show a Gentile is admitted to be exceptional, and it is shown how it need not involve any setting aside of the necessary restrictions of His ministry. This brings the words of the centurion into closer correspondence with the words of the Syro-phoenician woman, which won a similar commendation. To the writer it seems at least more probable that what Jesus so warmly praised was such insight into the conditions and limitations under which He had to do His work.

10. If it be admitted that Jesus knew that His work lay among the Jews, it may still be urged, was it necessary that He should hold Himself quite so much aloof from the Gentiles? Could He not occasionally have ministered to Gentiles while making Jews His chief care? The story of the Syro-phoenician woman seems to offer an answer to that question. His refusal of the request of the disciples to grant her petition that she might be got rid of, in the words, "I was not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and His repulse of the woman's approach in the saying, "It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs" (Matt. xv. 24-26), have caused

much bewilderment. It is no adequate explanation that Jesus wanted to be alone with His disciples that He might teach them, and was afraid of being again drawn into a healing ministry which might interfere with this purpose. The language of Jewish exclusiveness is not thus accounted for. But may not this be the explanation? He had gone beyond the borders of the "holy land" into the "unclean country" of the Gentiles. May not some of the disciples have objected to His leaving "the children" to go to "the dogs"? In His language He may not be expressing His own feelings or wishes, but simply echoing the opinions and sentiments of His disciples. To expose the evil of their Jewish exclusiveness He compels them to face all its consequences. A mother pleading for her daughter's cure must not only be refused her request, but must be rebuked for her arrogance, if this attitude is to be consistently maintained. While thus teaching the disciples a much-needed lesson, He, by using another word for dog, not offensive as the term which they had doubtless used, as well as by the look with which, and the tone in which, the words were uttered, encouraged the mother to press her request, and offered her a suggestion of the plea which could not be resisted. The disciples with all their prejudices would be made to feel by the woman's words that the kindness shown to domestic animals rebuked the inhumanity of their feelings towards the Gentiles. If the national arrogance of His disciples made it necessary for Him to find a special reason for showing kindness to a Gentile, we can understand why, that He might not estrange the Jews, but might keep open as long as possible the opportunity of winning them to faith in Him, He, although not sharing yet so far took account of, Jewish prejudice against the Gentiles. "That He might redeem them that were under the law," not only "was He born under the law," but He accepted as part of His bondage,

that He might free the bond, this Jewish exclusiveness.

11. Even when the Jews rejected Him He did not forsake but clung to them. He sought no way of escape from their hatred and cruelty. How suggestive in this connexion is His interview with the Greeks who sought to see Him (John xii. 20-24). Did the temptation present itself to Him, that, although rejected by the Jews, He might find acceptance among the Gentiles? Such a possibility His enemies seem to have admitted (vii. 35). The intense emotion which Jesus displayed on hearing the request, and the great significance He assigned to the incident show that the hope that the Gentiles would believe on Him though His own people had not believed, was not altogether new and strange to Him. But, as if to repel the temptation to seek His glorification among the Gentiles by some other way than by the sacrifice of Himself at the hands of the Jews, in a simple figure of speech, profound in its significance, He asserted the necessity of His death to the extension of His kingdom. He submitted to a Divine command to cleave unto His people, to offer Himself as their Messiah in the fulfilment of the promises of God as proof of God's fidelity, to force the issue of their acceptance or rejection of Him, and to abide the consequence of their rejection in His own death. For only by carrying out to the very end His vocation as Jewish Messiah, in accordance with prophecy, could He fulfil His larger call as Saviour of mankind. To sum up this discussion Jesus embraced all mankind in His love and grace; whenever the opportunity of showing His sympathy and giving His succour to Samaritans or Gentiles presented itself He gladly welcomed it; nevertheless He confined His ministry to the Jews, because the soil had been prepared by prophetic teaching for the seed of the Gospel, because the Divine promise to Israel bound Him who had

come to fulfil it to give Israel full opportunity of acceptance, because even Jewish prejudice had to be consulted lest any stumblingblock should be put in the way of faith, and because only by self-sacrifice could He bring salvation to Jew and Gentile alike.

ALFRED E. GARVIE.