



Breaking All the Rules

JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

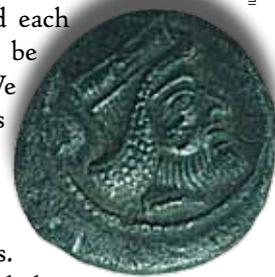
BY RODNEY REEVES

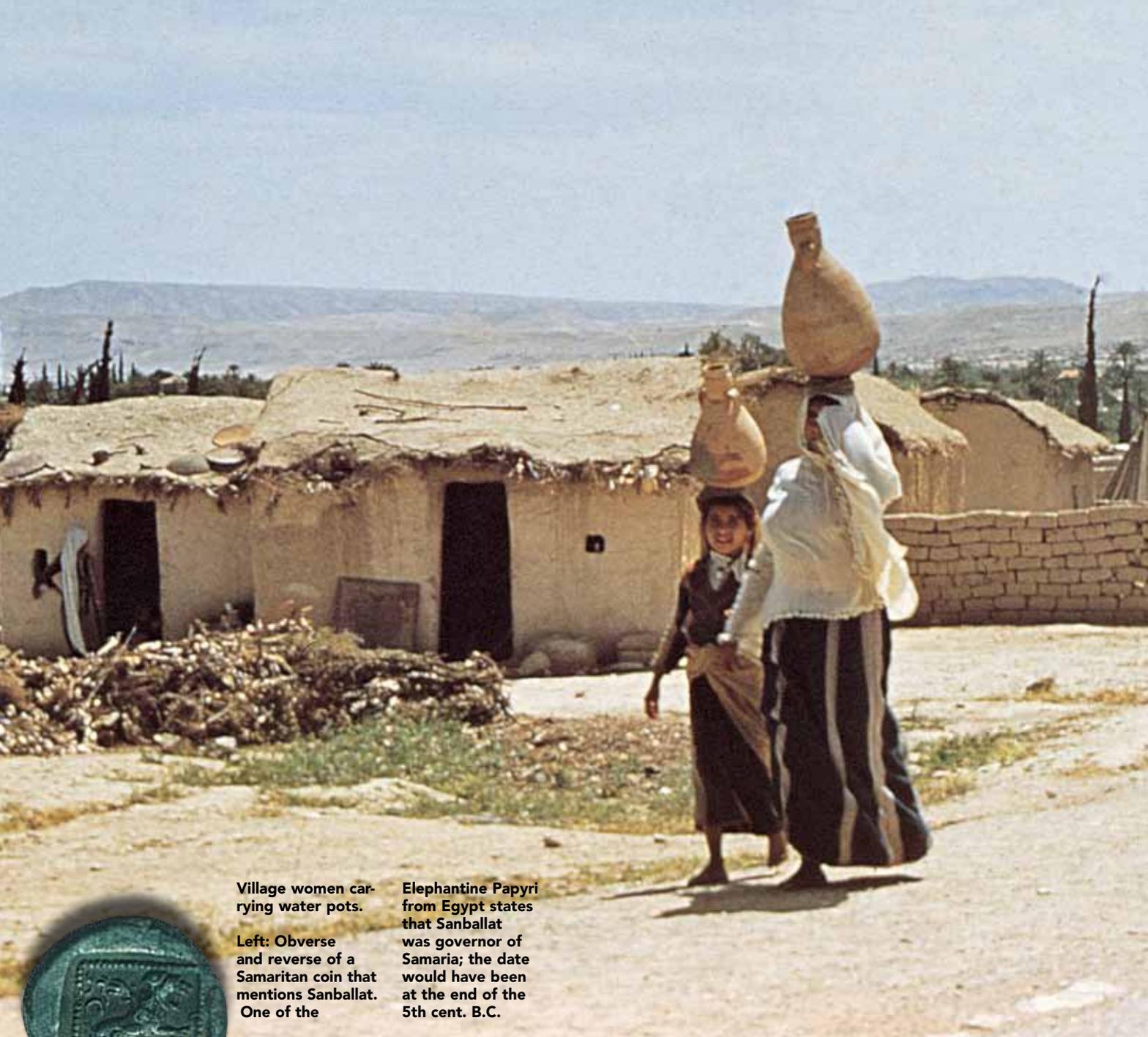
NO WONDER Jesus constantly got in trouble with the rules-keepers—He believed people were more important than rules. Jesus’ behavior inflamed the hatred of the Pharisees, who were known for keeping all the rules—not only the Law of God but also the commandments of men. Additionally, when Jesus set aside social convictions for the sake of the kingdom, even His disciples were occasionally puzzled over His unconventional behavior (John 4:27). Like any culture, society dictated certain things a person should and should not do. These social convictions were informed by religious beliefs, ethnic history, community expectations, and family obligations. Anyone who ignored these unspoken rules was considered arrogant and dangerous. This was especially true in Jesus’ day, where a person’s social group defined his or her identity. Compliance was the norm; individuality was not tolerated. So, Jews were expected to behave like Jews. Men were to behave like men. To do otherwise was to invite the judgment of your people.

Jesus seemed to break all the rules when He made a simple request of a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well (vv. 5-42). Who would have thought that “Give me a drink” would be such a provocative request? In fact,

John felt it necessary to explain to his readers who were obviously unfamiliar with the local customs that “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (v. 9). Indeed, Jesus was obviously doing more than simply trying to quench His thirst when He asked the Samaritan woman for water. He was defying the stereotypes that divided people—then and now—believing that our common need of a Savior would unite all people, whether Jews or Samaritans, male or female, righteous or sinners.

The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other because they both claimed to be the true children of Abraham. We know the Judeans were descendants of the Southern Kingdom, consisting of two tribes: Judah and Benjamin (1 Kings 12:20-24). But, we do not know the ancestral identity of the Samaritans. Some scholars think they descended from the Northern Kingdom, after the Assyrians conquered and colonized the Israelites (2 Kings 17:24-41). These were the people who lived in Samaria and were called “Cutheans” (named after a city just north of Babylon), the progeny of intermarriage between Israelites and Assyrians, whose descendants may have been among those who confronted Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 4:1-4).¹ Other scholars believe the Samaritans were





Village women carrying water pots.

Elephantine Papyri from Egypt states that Sanballat was governor of Samaria; the date would have been at the end of the 5th cent. B.C.

Left: Obverse and reverse of a Samaritan coin that mentions Sanballat. One of the



descendants of priests who defected from Jerusalem some time after the campaigns of Ezra and Nehemiah but before the Hasmonean dynasty (a Jewish kingdom that combined the priesthood and the monarchy). These protestors withdrew to Shechem of Samaria, eventually built a temple on Mount Gerizim (which the Samaritans claimed to be the original location of the tabernacle), preserved their own version of the Law of Moses (the Samaritan Pentateuch), and claimed to be the true children of God. In 128 B.C., a Hasmonean king, John Hyrcanus, destroyed the temple of these “Shechemites,” who in turn retaliated by attacking a group of Jewish pilgrims traveling through Samaria. These so-called Samaritans were also accused of purposely defiling the

Jewish temple.² Regardless of their origin (whether descendants of the Northern Kingdom or malcontents who abandoned Jerusalem during the Hellenistic period), the Samaritans were mortal enemies of the Jewish people.

Jesus did more than ignore centuries of ethnic hostilities when He asked the Samaritan woman for a drink of water. To be sure, Jesus’ request startled the woman (John 4:9). Her surprise, though, had as much to do with the gender issues of the day as the troubled history between Jews and Samaritans. Men and women seldom engaged in public conversation—even husbands and wives conversed mainly in their own houses. The reason a man would approach an unknown woman in public typically would be to initiate an improper relationship. That was potentially the way the Samaritan woman interpreted



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHLAIZ (9/24/11)

Jesus' request. To her way of thinking, a strange man traveling alone was probably looking for some company. Besides, the fact that the woman was drawing water by herself in the middle of the day would have signaled to any man that she was a rule breaker, marginalized by the other women. Domestic chores were done together; a troubled woman would have been ostracized by the rest of the wives. So, when Jesus said, "Go, call your husband," the woman would have taken the comment as an inquiry into her availability. Indeed, when she responded, "I have no husband," she was signaling her willingness to take the next step in this potentially salacious encounter (vv. 16,17, NASB). She had no idea, though, whom she was addressing. She would soon discover that she had never met a man like Jesus.

After Jesus revealed to the Samaritan woman that He knew the details of her troubled past, she realized this was no ordinary man (v. 19). At this point the implications of Jesus' behavior must have come into clearer focus for her. "He's a Jew; I'm a Samaritan. He's a man; I'm a woman. He's a prophet; I'm a sinner. Why in the world would he ask me for a drink?" In their day, a holy man would never risk defilement by drinking from an unclean bucket—a vessel that belonged to an unclean, immoral, Samaritan woman. By His willingness to drink from her bucket, Jesus was essentially saying that she was a clean vessel too. That must have become evermore apparent when He treated her questions with respect. In most cases, a man would say to a curious woman, "This is not your concern," because

Above: Overview of Shechem with Mount Ebal in the background. Shechem, which translates as "shoulders" in Hebrew, is located between two mountains, Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. Shechem and Sychar were both part of the same ancient settlement; the word "Sychar" was likely a derivation of the word "Shechem." Jacob made his home here; his well is located at Sychar.

Right: Crusader-Era church built at the site of Jacob's well in Shechem.

HE DID THAT ON PURPOSE!

By deliberately sitting on the well without a bucket, Jesus placed himself strategically to be in need of whomever appeared with the necessary equipment. The woman approached. On seeing her, Jesus was expected to courteously withdraw to a distance of at least twenty feet, indicating that it was both safe and culturally appropriate for her to approach the well. Only then could she move to the well, unroll her small leather bucket, lower it into the water, fill her jar and be on her way. Jesus did not move as she approached." **B**

Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 202.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUCHTON (8/17/12)

only men studied the Scriptures. Jesus, however, seemed to relish their theological conversation, answering her questions in a way that invited more curiosity. His response to her question about the location of the true temple of God probably confused her (v. 20). A Jewish man should have said, "Jerusalem. Certainly not on Mount Gerizim." But when Jesus replied, "neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" (v. 21, NASB), His words simply confirmed His



Ruins of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. After the exile, the Samaritans built their temple on Mount Gerizim; shown are the ruins of that temple. John Hyrcanus, the Hasmonean

king, destroyed the temple in 128 B.C. Thus the woman at the well could point to the ruins and say to Jesus, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, yet you Jews say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20, HCSB).

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (9/23/18)



Right: Interior of the Church of Jacob's Well in Shechem.



MAISON PHOTO/ LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/ WASHINGTON, D.C.

made clear to her that the time had come for all people, whether Jew or Samaritan, man or woman, clean or unclean, to worship the one, living, true God.

That was why Jesus shared the secret of His identity with her. And that was why she ran into her town bragging about the man she met at Jacob's well. She drank deeply from the well of living water. She discovered the God whom all people are to worship. She found the Messiah who explained everything. And, just as Jesus predicted, from her sprang up living water, bringing life to some Samaritans who came to believe that Jesus, a Jewish man, is the "Savior of the world" (v. 42).

Why did this happen? Because Jesus knows that, regardless of who we are on the outside and despite the rules that separate us, deep down we are all the same. We are individuals who need a Savior. **B**

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 9.14.3.

2. An example of desecration of the temple occurred a few years before Jesus was born. The Samaritans purportedly scattered corpses throughout the temple the night before Passover. *Ibid.*, 18.2.2.

behavior. Jesus treated this immoral, Samaritan woman as if she were just as important to God as a Jewish holy man. Indeed, a temple that once divided Jew and Gentile, male and female, clean and unclean would no longer define sacred space in the messianic age. Jesus, the new temple of God, had come to her mountain. He

Rodney Reeves is dean of The Courts Redford College of Theology and Church Vocations of Southwest Baptist University, Bolivar, Missouri.