

# 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)

## THE QUESTION OF SYCHAR.

(JOHN IV.)

THE identification of Sychar would be a small matter, if it were not that its difficulty, as well as that of the whole topography of the Fourth of John, has been made the ground, by some for doubting, by others for denying, that the author of the Gospel was personally acquainted with the geography of Palestine. A well-known writer has said bluntly that there was no such place as Sychar, and that the Gospel commits a blunder.<sup>1</sup> And recently Mr. Cross (in the *Critical Review* for July) has stated a number of difficulties in the way of accepting Fourth John as the account of an eye-witness. The time has come for a revision of the whole argument. I hope, by pointing out some material things that have hitherto been overlooked, to meet Mr. Cross's difficulties, and if not to place the identification of Sychar beyond all doubt, at least to adduce sufficient evidence in its support to prove the charge of mistake unfounded and even absurd.

The objections made to the topography of Fourth John are three:—I. Sychar is not known to us as *a city of Samaria*. II. Even if Sychar be proved to be either Shechem or the present El 'Askar, no woman seeking water would have come from it to Jacob's Well. III. Expositions, based on the accuracy of the narrative, involve an error concerning the direction of the main road through Samaria to Galilee.

I. *Supernatural Religion* holds it evident that there was no such place as Sychar: and that "a very significant mistake" has been committed by the author of John's Gospel—significant, that is, of his ignorance of Palestine.

<sup>1</sup> *Supernatural Religion*, ii. 427.

Now, to begin with, let us remember that the writer of the Fourth Gospel is admitted to have been a man well acquainted with the Old Testament, and that in the Old Testament the position of the locality in question, *the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph* is more than once carefully fixed. In Genesis xxxiii. 19 it is described as *in face of or to the east of the city of Shechem*;<sup>1</sup> and in Joshua xxiv. 32 as *in Shechem*. It is inconceivable that, with these passages before him, any student of the Old Testament would have, in mere error, substituted Sychar for Sychem—*Συχάρ* for *Συχέμ*. But the point goes further. Had the writer of the Gospel possessed only that knowledge of the locality which the Old Testament gave him, it is most probable that like Stephen<sup>2</sup> he would have used the name *Συχέμ*. That he introduces another name, is surely a sign that he employed another source of information. All now agree that Sychar is not a copyist's error.<sup>3</sup> If, then, the author himself wrote it, he did so in spite of two well-known passages in the Old Testament—with which his familiarity is evident—and, therefore, it may safely be presumed, because of his acquaintance with Sychar as a name in the topography of Samaria.

In that topography Sychar can have stood—either as a second name for Shechem, or as the name of another place in the neighbourhood of Shechem.

For the first of these alternatives a good deal has been said, but all in the way of hypothesis. It is within the bounds of possibility, that, by their favourite habit of playing upon names, the Jews may have called Shechem Sheqer, *false*, or Shichor, *drunken*.<sup>4</sup> But we have absolutely no

<sup>1</sup> That is if we adopt the rendering which takes *Shalem* adverbially, *in peace*.

<sup>2</sup> Acts viii. 16.

<sup>3</sup> This was Jerome's way out of the difficulty.

<sup>4</sup> שקר, *falsehood*, was applied to idols (Hab. ii. 18). In Isaiah xxviii., reference is made to drunkenness, שכור, as the notorious sinners of Samaria.

proof of their ever having done so, and it is to be noted that the passage in Isaiah xxviii., which is quoted in support of the second, and etymologically the only possible, derivation for Sychar, does not describe Shechem at all, but the city of Samaria, or Sebaste, six miles away. Trench's idea, that John, in his habit of symbolising, was himself the author of the nickname, is too far-fetched.<sup>1</sup>

We turn, therefore, to the second possibility, that Sychar was the name of a place other than Shechem, but like Shechem in the neighbourhood of *the parcel of ground which Jacob bought*. For this the first evidence we get is in the beginning of the fourth century, when two visitors to the land, Eusebius and the Bordeaux Pilgrim (the latter about A.D. 333), both mention a Sychar, distinct from Shechem,—lying, says the former, before Neapolis, the present Nablús,<sup>2</sup> and the latter adds that it was a Roman mile from Shechem. Jerome, it is true, asserts that Shechem and Sychar are the same; but he says so without evidence except such as all now agree to be unfounded,<sup>3</sup> and his negative assertion cannot stand against the other two, who say that they saw this Sychar distinct from Shechem—the less so, that in translating Eusebius Jerome adopts his Sychar without question. The next traces of a separate Sychar are found in mediæval writers. The Abbot Daniel (1106–1107) speaks of “the hamlet of Jacob called Sichar. Jacob's well is there. Near this place, at half a verst away, is the town of Samaria . . . at present called Neapolis.” Fetellus (1130) says: “A mile from Sichem is the town of Sychar, in it is the fountain of Jacob, which however is a well.” John of Wurzburg (1160–1170) says: “Sichem is to-day called Neapolis. Sichar is east of Sichem, near to

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in the Gospels*, 86.

<sup>2</sup> From which Eusebius also distinguishes Shechem, describing the latter as in the suburbs of Neapolis and holding Joseph's tomb. (Euseb., *Onomasticon*.)

<sup>3</sup> Viz., the confusion by some copyist of Sychar with Sychem.

the field which Jacob gave to his son, wherein is the well of Jacob, at which place a church is now being built.”<sup>1</sup> Again in the Samaritan Chronicle, the latest possible date of which is the fourteenth century, there occurs the name of a town “apparently near Shechem, which is spelt Ischar,” with initial Aleph, which is merely a vulgar pronunciation of Sychar.<sup>2</sup> Quaresmius, who wrote about 1630,<sup>3</sup> reports that Brocardus (1283) saw “a certain large city deserted and in ruins, believed to have been that ancient Sichem, to the left” or north “of Jacob’s well”: “the natives told me the place is now called Istar by them.” Then the traveller Berggren found the name ‘Askar or ‘Asgar, with initial ‘Ain, given both to a spring ‘Ain el ‘Askar, which he identifies with Jacob’s Well, and—which is much more important for our question—to the whole plain below, the Sahil el ‘Askar.<sup>4</sup> And, finally, the name still attaches to a few ruins and hovels at the foot of Mount Ebal, about one mile and three-quarters E.N.E. from Nablús and little over half a mile N. from Jacob’s Well.<sup>5</sup> The question is, can ‘Askar be derived from Sychar through Ischar? Robinson says no: “the fact that ‘Askar begins with the letter ‘Ain excludes all idea of affinity with the name Sychar.”<sup>6</sup> But Robinson is wrong. Though the tendency is the other way, there are cases known in which ‘Ain has displaced Aleph. Conder says that the Samaritans themselves in

<sup>1</sup> I quote Daniel (who very curiously confounds Neapolis with Sebaste), Fetellus, John of Wurzburg, from the translations of the Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society.

<sup>2</sup> Conder, *Tent Work*, 41.

<sup>3</sup> “*Elucidatio Terræ Sanctæ*,” Lib. vii., Peregr. i. Cap. ix. That it is the report of Brocardus which Quaresmius gives and not his own is clear from the next paragraph, where he says: “Fateor me non vidiisse nisi Neapolem, nec vetus Sychar,” etc.

<sup>4</sup> *Reise*, ii. 267, quoted by Robinson.

<sup>5</sup> First described by Canon Williams and since with greatest detail by Major Conder, *Tent Work*, 40–42.

<sup>6</sup> *Later Researches*, 133.

translating their chronicle into Arabic call Ischar 'Askar.<sup>1</sup> And it has hitherto been overlooked that among the place-names of Palestine we have a strictly analogous case. Ascalon in Hebrew begins with an Aleph, but in Arabic this has changed to an initial 'Ain. The case, therefore, for 'Askar, so far from being barred by the rules of the language, comes through this last test in all its strength. And its strength, in short, is this. That in the fourth century two authorities independently describe a Sychar distinct from Shechem; that in the twelfth century at least three travellers, and in the thirteenth at least one, do the same, the latter also quoting a corrupt but still possible variation of the name; that in the fourteenth the Samaritan chronicle mentions another form of the name; and that modern travellers find a third possible variation of it not only applied to a village suiting the site described by the authorities in the fourth century, but important enough to cover all the plain about the village. All this is perhaps not conclusive, but at least very strong, proof for the identification of 'Askar with Sychar. Certainly there is enough of it to expose the dictum of *Supernatural Religion* that it is "evident" there was no such place as Sychar, and that the writer of the Gospel made "a mistake." The "evidence," so far as it goes, is all the other way.

Of course it may be said that the name Sychar was fastened on the district by the Christian pilgrims and sacred-site-jobbers of the fourth century—who were forced to find a place for it since it occurred in the Gospel. But to this the answer is obvious. For many centuries after the fourth it was taken for granted that Jerome was right and that Shechem and Sychar were the same place.<sup>2</sup> That

<sup>1</sup> *Tent Work*, 41.

<sup>2</sup> By, among others, Arnulf, 700; Saewulf, apparently, 1102; Theoderich, 1172; Sir J. Maundeville, 1322; Tuchem of Nurnberg, 1480. A curious opinion

all this time, in spite of ecclesiastical tradition, the name Sychar should have continued to exist in the neighbourhood, and solely among the natives, is a strong proof of its originality—of its having been from the first a native and not an artificial name.

II. This still leaves us with the second difficulty. Granted that Sychar is either Shechem, the present Nablûs, or 'Askar, is it likely that any woman from them, seeking water, should have come past streams in their immediate neighbourhood to the more distant, the deep and scanty well of Jacob. There is a copious fountain in 'Askar: and a stream, capable of turning a mill, flows down the valley only "a few rods"<sup>1</sup> from Jacob's well. This the woman, if coming from 'Askar, must have crossed—if coming from Shechem, must have passed near it and many other sources of water. Jacob's well itself was over one hundred feet deep,<sup>2</sup> and is often dry.

Now in answer to this, it may be justly said, that the real difficulty is not why the woman should have come to the well, but why the well should be there at all. That any one should have dug so deep a well, in the immediate neighbourhood of so many streams, is most perplexing, unless indeed in those far away summers the surface streams ran dry, and the well was dug so deep that it might catch their fainting waters below the surface.<sup>3</sup> Be that as it

is offered by the Graf zu Solms (1483) that "on the right hand of this well" of Jacob, that is, to the south of it, "ist ein alter grosser Fleck aber öde, dass ich meyne die alte Statt Sichem seyn gewesen, dann gross alt Gebäw da ist. Und liget von dem abgenanten Brunnen Jacob zwen steinwürff weit, gar an einer lustigen Stett, allein dass es Wasser mangelt." But from Neapolis the well was two bowshots off, so that "some say Neapolis is Thebes."

<sup>1</sup> Robinson.

<sup>2</sup> "Thirty-five yards," Maundrell; "one hundred and five feet," Holmes.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson indeed suggests that an earthquake may have changed the whole disposition of the waters in the vale of Shechem since the time of the narra-

may, the well is there,—a fact, testifying past all doubt the possibility of the fact of the woman's use of it. Specially dug for man's use by man, how impressively among the natural streams around does it explain the intensity of the woman's words: *Our father Jacob gave us the well*. Of course it was *given*, not found. The signs of labour and expense stand out upon it all the more pathetically for the freedom of the waters that come rattling down the vale; and must, one feels, have had their share in increasing the fondness of that tradition which, possibly, was the attraction that drew Jacob's fanatic children to its scantier supplies.<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible to say whether the well is now dry, for many feet of it are choked with stones. Robinson says there is a spring in it,<sup>2</sup> Conder that it fills by infiltration. If either of these be correct, then we can understand the double titles given to it in the narrative, both of which our version renders by *well*. It is *Jacob's fountain*, *πηγή* (v. 5); *but the pit*, *τὸ φρέαρ*, *is deep* (v. 11); and *Jacob gave us the pit* (v. 12). It is by little touches like these, and by the agreement of the rest of the topography,—Mount Gerizim, and the road from Judæa to Galilee—(as well as by the unbroken traditions of three religions), that we feel sure that this is the Jacob's Well intended by the writer, and that he had seen the place.

Thus, then, the present topography, so far from contradicting, justifies the narrative. The author knew the place about which he was writing.

III. By Jacob's well the great north road through  
tive. Possible, for on that high pass very little could tilt the watershed to the west, but in an argument like this we do not dare to count on it.

<sup>1</sup> Porter mentions a favourite well outside Damascus which drew the inhabitants a mile away from their own abundant waters.

<sup>2</sup> *Lat. Res.*, 108.

Samaria forks, and the well lies in the fork. One branch turns eastward up the vale past Shechem and so on round the west of Ebal to Sebaste, and Gennin. The other holds north across the mouth of the vale and past 'Askar. Now Mr. Cross (in the *Critical Review* for July) takes exception to Lightfoot's and Stanley's speaking of this second road as the main road to Galilee. He says the latter has always gone by Shechem and Sebaste, and that the road which holds across the mouth of the vale turns north-east into the Jordan valley at Bethshan, and leads not to Upper Galilee, where our Lord was going, but to Tiberias and the Lake. He is correct when he says the Shechem road is the ordinary road, but wrong in saying there is not a road across the mouth of the vale and so on to Gennin. As he admits, Robinson was told of such a road; and I have to report that being anxious last year to avoid the road by Sebaste, which I had already traversed, I was informed by my muleteers that I could reach Gennin by following the Bethshan road and, when it struck east, keeping due north. Moreover, this is a much more natural direction for the trunk road to the north to take, than round by Shechem and Sebaste. For if any one will take the Survey Map, he will see this direction to be on the line of that series of plains which come right down from Esdraelon to opposite the vale of Shechem:<sup>1</sup> while the road round by Sebaste has to climb a great barrier of hills. Besides, such a road would be preferred by our Lord, avoiding as it did both Shechem and Sebaste, two large towns, one Greek, the other Samaritan, close to which, if He turned up the valley, He must needs have passed.

So that Lightfoot and Stanley are probably correct; but the point is a small one, and does not affect the narrative

<sup>1</sup> As described in *THE EXPOSITOR* for July.

in John. Upon the data given there, our Lord and His disciples after their rest at Jacob's well may have intended to take any one of the three roads—and that, whether the city to which the disciples went to buy bread was Shechem or was 'Askar.

GEORGE ADAM SMITH.