

The Women Caught in Adultery

¹ Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³ Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. ⁴ They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ⁶ They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more." (John 8:1-11)



Detail of "Christ and the Adulteress" Rembrandt, 1644 | National Gallery London | PD-US

The Background and Setting

The placement of this pericope falls between Jesus' contentious encounter with religious leadership during the Festival of Tabernacles and Jesus' dialogue that begins, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" (John 8:12) - which begins another contentious encounter. As many commentators have noted, the John 7 dialogue seems to flow more smoothly into the "Light of the World" discourse than the story of the woman caught in adultery. More on this later.

In any event, our gospel is another point of contention with the religious authorities in Jerusalem. Jesus has already sensed that "some" meant to kill him (Jn7:12) which to be the rumor on the street (v.25). The

Pharisees, concerned about the rumbling of the crowds, send guards to arrest Jesus (v.32). Failing on that point, they will seek to engage him on other matters and at other times.

In the background of the story is the question of Jesus' identity - which is exactly the question at the end of John 7: "Some in the crowd who heard these words said, 'This is truly the Prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But others said, 'The Messiah will not come from Galilee, will he? Does not scripture say that the Messiah will be of David's family and come from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' So a division occurred in the crowd because of him." (Jn 7:40-43). The concern of the religious authorities is that Jesus is another "messiah-wanna'be" which only leads to problems with the Roman authorities. Their question is whether he is authentically a man of God in the tradition of the great prophet Moses.

The Law of Moses is quite clear as regards adultery:

"If a man commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death." (Lev 20:10)

"If a man is discovered having relations with a woman who is married to another, both the man and the woman with whom he has had relations shall die. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst." (Dt 22:22)

As the scene begins the temple area is filled with people, "Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle." (Jn 8:3).

The intention of the scribes and Pharisee was to simply use the woman and her circumstances "so that they could have some charge to bring against [Jesus]" (v.6) in order to fulfill their own murderous intent against Jesus (7:1). Their immediate goal is to trap Jesus between the requirements of the Law and his teaching of forgiveness and reconciliation. Will Jesus show himself to be a true son of Moses and do what the Law requires, i.e. agree that stoning the woman is the God-intended course of action? Will he defy the law and offer forgiveness?

The story unfolds in four stages:

- The Setting of the Scene (8:1-8:2)
- The Challenge of the Jewish Leaders (8:3-6)
- Jesus Response to the Leaders (8:7-9)
- Jesus' Reconciliation of the Woman (8:10-11)

The Setting of the Scene. In John 7 the Feast of Tabernacles is underway. Jesus has been publically teaching in the Temple precincts, arousing the interest of the people and the concern of the Jewish religious leadership. The leadership meeting presumably took place on the last (and seventh) day of the feast. They are discussing what to do with Jesus – and murder seems to be on their minds (7:1). Early the next day, Jesus is coming early to the temple to teach on the morning of the added eighth day of the feast, which was a day of rest (Lev 23:39).

The Pharisees disturbed whatever rest there was to be had. In the middle of the public forum that was the Temple area, the Pharisees bring a woman "caught in adultery." This does not mean that there were suspicions or circumstantial indications. This means that the witnesses had seen the very act. The first question that immediately rises to the fore is: where is the man? Why has he not been hauled into the public square? Perhaps he ran away or was let go? Perhaps he was never there and this is a woman about whom there are rumors (the tense of the verb "taken" indicates an act with continuity in time) and a particularly zealous Pharisee - or a particularly vindictive one. It is not hard to imagine an echo of the story of Susanna in the *Book of Daniel*. It has the hallmarks of a trap deliberately set.

The Challenge of the Jewish Leaders. This stage of the story describes the challenge presented to Jesus by the Jewish leaders, but also infers things about their treatment of the woman, which is callous and demeaning. If she had committed adultery the previous evening, then have these opponents been holding her during the night and waiting for Jesus to show up in order to use her to test him? Has she been apprehended in the early hours of the morning? In either case her fear would have been palpable. Putting her in the midst of the crowd would have added public humiliation.

The scene is a mixture of zealous righteousness that seeks to enact the law without pardon or quarter, the leadership who want to trap Jesus between mercy and the Law, and a woman caught in sin, fearing for her life. The Law commands a stoning to death as punishment for her transgressions. More precisely the law speaks of the death of both the man and the woman involved (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22-24). The law makes it clear that stoning could only take place after a careful trial, which included the chance for the condemned to confess his or her wrong (*m. Sanhedrin* 6:1-4).

True righteousness would have some measure of concern for her soul. True righteousness would be free from deceitfulness, not hiding behind loyalty to Moses for other intentions. Since the law says both the man and the woman who commit adultery are to be killed, we are left wondering why the man was not brought in as well. It may be that he had escaped, but the fact that only the woman is brought raises suspicions and does not speak well of the true object of their zeal.

This situation is apparently just an attempt to entrap Jesus (v. 6). If he is lax toward the law, then he is condemned. But if he holds a strict line, then he has allowed them to prevail in their merciless treatment of this woman and has opened himself up to trouble from the Romans, for he will be held responsible if the stoning proceeds. The leaders of Israel are putting God to the test in the person of his Son, repeating the Israelites' historical pattern on more than one occasion in the wilderness at Meribah and Massah (Ex 17:2; Num 20:13; cf. Deut 6:16; Ps 95:8-9; 106:14).

“Most interpreters accept the view that Jesus faced a charge under either Roman law or the law of Moses. If he said ‘Stone her,’ he would lay himself open to the charge of counseling action contrary to Roman law, which did not provide for a death penalty in such cases. If he said ‘Do not stone her,’ he could be charged with offending against the law of God. The question was a loaded one. Either answer would involve Jesus in difficulties. This may indeed be the dilemma his opponents had in mind” (Morris, 782)

They wanted a legal basis on which to accuse him. Jesus’ reaction was to ignore them.

Jesus' Response to the Leaders. When he heard what the teachers of the law said, Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. There is no hint of why he wrote or what he wrote. One scholar offered that Jesus wrote out Ex 23:1 “*You shall not repeat a false report. Do not join the wicked in putting your hand, as an unjust witness, upon anyone.*” Another suggested: “*O LORD, the hope of Israel, ...those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.*” (Jer 17:13 ESV) The suggestion is that "written in the earth" is the polar opposite of being written in the book of life (Ex 32:32; Dan 12:1). But already mentioned, there is no hint of why he wrote or what he wrote.

When the Pharisees and scribes kept on questioning him, Jesus straightened up and said to them, ‘*If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*’ According to the law, witnesses to a capital offense had to cast the first stone when the accused was condemned to death (Deut. 17:7). Jesus regarded the teachers of the law as witnesses to the offense. Therefore, they should begin the execution if it were to go ahead. But Jesus’ words challenged the accusers, implying that none of them was without sin and therefore they were in no position to condemn this woman. What sin Jesus was implying they were guilty of is not clear. Perhaps they too were guilty of adultery. Perhaps they were malicious witnesses in terms of Deuteronomy 19:15–21, because they were not interested in seeing justice done, but only in

trapping Jesus. However, this is unlikely, because in Deuteronomy 19:15–21 the malicious witness is a false witness; the question of motive is not mentioned. Having said this, again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. This is probably best understood as an indication that Jesus was refusing further debate. We are not told what Jesus actually wrote, so it is pointless to speculate. What he wrote plays no part in the story, because the teachers of the law, the crowd and the woman all responded to what Jesus said, not what he wrote. Therefore it did not need to be recorded.

An optimistic reading of Jesus' call for the one without sin to cast the first stone is "all the people" have been turned away from their murderous intentions onto the path of life as they withdraw to reflect on their own sinfulness before God. It has often been suggested that the eldest accusers were the first to leave (v. 9) because they recognized their own sinfulness more readily. However, leaving in this order may simply reflect the custom of deferring to the elders. In any case, their withdrawal was in fact a recognition of sin. Those who came to condemn ended up condemning themselves by not casting a stone.

Jesus is left alone, sitting on the ground, bent over and writing, with the woman standing before him. As Augustine says, "The two were left alone, *misera et misericordia*" ("a wretched woman and Mercy"; In John 33.5).

Jesus' Reconciliation of the Woman. This prepares for the fourth and final stage of this story--Jesus' response to the woman (vv. 10-11). He straightens up and asks for a report of what happened, as if he had been totally oblivious to what took place as he concentrated on his writing. He does not ask her about the charges but rather about that aspect of the situation most heartening to the woman: Where are they? Has no one condemned you? (v. 10).

But there is one left who could still execute the judgment--the only one present who was without sin and thus could throw the first stone. Is she hopeful at this point or still quite frightened? We can only speculate as to whether the woman was familiar with Jesus and his embodiment of the mercy of God. In any case, she becomes a memorable example of the fact that "*God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*" (3:17). Jesus says to her, "*Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more*" (8:11). Jesus grants pardon, not acquittal. Here is mercy and righteousness. He condemned the sin and not the sinner (Augustine In John 33.6). But more than that, he called her to a new life. The gospel is not only the forgiveness of sins, but a new quality of life that overcomes the power of sin (cf. 8:32-36; 1 Jn 3:4-6).

The story is a succinct expression of the mercy of Jesus; a scene St Augustine captures as he writes, at the end, *relictus sunt duo, misera et misericordia* (there stand the two alone, misery and mercy).

Reconciliation is not the result of a sinner's humiliation but the encounter of two persons. Without love, there is no forgiveness. With love, a whole new life is possible.

A Reflection from Pope Francis

Reflecting on the story in John's gospel of the woman caught in adultery, Pope Francis says: "the Gospel says that everyone went away, one by one, beginning with the elders: it is evident that they had a big debt against them in the bank of heaven." Then comes "the moment of Jesus, the Confessor". He was left alone with the woman standing before him. "Jesus was bending down and was writing with his finger on the ground. ... Then "he got up and looked" at the woman, who was "full of shame, and he said to her: Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? We are alone, you and I. You are standing before God, without accusations, without gossip: you and God".

The woman does not claim to be the victim of "a false accusation", she does not defend herself, saying: "I didn't commit adultery". No, "she acknowledges her sin" and she responds to Jesus, saying: "No one has condemned me, Lord". Then Jesus says to her: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again, in

order not to pass through a time of disgrace, in order not to experience such shame, in order not to offend God, in order not to sully the beautiful relationship between God and his people”.

“Jesus forgives. But there is something more here than forgiveness. For as a confessor Jesus goes beyond the law, for “the law said that she had to be punished”. Indeed, as the Pope noted, Jesus “was pure and could have thrown the first stone”. But he “went beyond this. He doesn’t tell her that adultery is not a sin, but he doesn’t condemn her with the law”. This, the Pope explained, is “the mystery of Jesus’ mercy ... in being merciful Jesus” goes beyond “the law which commanded that she be stoned”. “Mercy,” the Pope explained, “is something which is difficult to understand: it doesn’t eliminate sin”, for “it is God’s forgiveness” that does this. “Mercy is the manner in which God forgives”. For “Jesus could have said: ‘I forgive you, go!’ as he had said to the paralytic: your sins are forgiven!”. In this situation, however, “Jesus goes further” and counsels the woman “to sin no more”.

“How many of us would deserve to be condemned! And it would even be just. Yet he forgives!” How?, the Pope asked. “With this mercy”, which “does not eliminate sin: it is God’s forgiveness that eliminates it”, whereas “mercy goes beyond”. Pope Francis then compared God’s mercy to the sun: “we look at the sky, the many stars, but when the morning sun comes, we don’t see the stars. Such is the mercy of God: it is a great light of love, of tenderness”. For “God doesn’t forgive with a decree but with a caress”. He forgives by “caressing the wounds caused by our sins, because he is involved in forgiveness, is involved in our salvation”.

This is Jesus’ style as a confessor, the Pope said. He does not humiliate the adulterous woman. “He does not say to her: what did you do, when did you do it, how did you do it and with whom did you do it!” Instead, he tells her “to go and sin no more: God’s mercy is great, God’s mercy is great: forgiving us by caressing us”. (*Reflection on the daily mediation of Pope Francis, April 7, 2014, by L’Osservatore Romano*)

A Textual History of this Passage

The pericope of the “woman caught in adultery” is beloved and well-known. And yet, it does not appear in the oldest manuscripts of John’s Gospel. When it is found in older manuscripts it is located in other positions, either after verse 36, or after verse 44, or at the end of this Gospel, or even in another gospel: following Luke 21:38.

We are left to conjecture that the biblical scribes thought it too important to be lost but had little clue as to its proper location. Further complicating the provenance of the passage, the different manuscripts do not agree on the text either. In addition, some scholars hold that the style of writing is not consistent with the remainder of the gospel. Other don’t disagree, but hold that the passage is too short with limited vocabulary to make definitive judgements about the stylistic quality. But most, if not all, would agree that the spirit of the narrative is compatible with the Johannine message. It is also noted that the passage does not fit well into the context of Chapter 7 while noting 8:12 makes for more logical continuation following 7:52.

Throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic. It is referred to by the late 1st century bishop Papias who was a student of St. John the Evangelist. It is also mentioned in the Apostolic Constitutions (2.24).

If you look closely at your bible you will likely see brackets ([]) surrounding the passage with accompanying footnotes referencing its uncertain manuscript history. The Catholic Church has long held it to be part of the Canon of Scripture.

Notes

8:1 to the Mount of Olives: The parallel with the Lucan practice of Jesus' drawing aside for prayer in solitude is striking, cf. Luke 21:37 – “*During the day, Jesus was teaching in the temple area, but at night he would leave and stay at the place called the Mount of Olives.*”

8:2 in the temple area...all the people: The parallel with Luke 21:37 continues. Notably, Luke 21:38 reads “*And all the people would get up early each morning to listen to him in the temple area.*”

8:3 the scribes and Pharisee: this grouping of opponents is found only here in John although it is a common feature of the synoptic gospels

a woman who had been caught in adultery: the Greek makes it clear that the woman was found *in flagranti*, in the very act (v.4). Some commentators opine that this was perhaps all a ruse and the woman an accomplice in the scheme. The text is clear in vv.3,4 that this is not a play acted out for “all the people.” The implication is that this woman is married. Adultery in the Law was, for the most part, concerned with the faithfulness of the wife. Nothing is mentioned of her lover who must have escape – or been let go.

and made her stand in the middle: if indeed the woman was caught *in flagranti*, then one can easily imagine the woman if disheveled, distressed, and perhaps not completely dressed. Although the woman is “in the middle” of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees, and all the people, she has no part in the dialogue. This makes even more striking Jesus' later dialogue with her in vv.10-11. This is also the posture of the accused in a communal judicial setting.

8:4 Teacher: this recognition of Jesus' status sets the tone of the debate – whose teaching are authentic

8:5 So, what do you say?: The details of the woman's marital status are not provided. If she was married or betrothed, the punishment was death (Lev 20:10 and Deut 22:22 mention death but without the modality of execution, but Deut 22:23–24 prescribes stoning for a betrothed virgin). The adulterer and the guilty woman, if caught in the act, are to be punished by death (Dt. 22:22), since the covenant with the holy God demands the rooting out of everything evil from within Israel.

8:6 Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger: There is no consensus on what the posture or the action mean. Many see it as a symbolic reference to Jer 17:13 in which those who turn away from the Lord shall be recorded in the earth as they have forsaken the fountain of living water (possible internal reference to John 4:10 *ff.* as well as a more immediate reference back to John 7:38: “*Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’*”). One can also argue that in the face of v.10, there is no judgment being offered at all. Yet the Jeremiah text's reference to (*lit.*) “withdrawing” is highly provocative given the departure of the scribes, Pharisees and people in v.9.

There is speculation about what was written. A tradition that goes back to St Jerome and which later appeared in 10th century Armenian gospel manuscripts is that Jesus wrote the sins of the accusers. Given that this pericope appears in the midst of a section of John which is concerned with the identity of Jesus, some scholars have proposed this is a symbolic action echoing Dan 5:24 *ff* in which the finger of the divine writes judgment upon the king of Babylon. Other suggest Jeremiah 17:13, ““Those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the fountain of living water.” These are other suggestions, but each faces the problem that the passage simply lacks a referent, and thus it could be divine judgment or divine doodling.

8:7 Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her: These words reflect Lv 24:1-16; Dt 13:10; and 17:2-7 (where the witness should throw the first stone).

8:9 *they went away*: If this were a simple conflict story, then the account would end as the opponent withdrew. But the story continues, pointing to its real intent – the encounter with the woman.

8:11 *Go, (and) from now on do not sin any more*: πορεύου, [καὶ] ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε. Literally, “Go, [and] away from this time no longer sin.” Many translations do not include ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν (from this time) as a superfluous addition to the meaning. But the words are significant. Jesus is pinpointing the turning point in this woman’s life, a life giving point – literally and salvifically. She must not fall back into a way that leads to death.

Sources

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