

A Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8:1-11)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Questions About the Text for This Story

- a. Depending on what Bible you are reading from, you may notice a footnote either casting doubt on, or else affirming, whether this story is part of the original account. For example:
 - i. In one Bible I have (NIV) it says, “The earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have **John 7:53-8:11.**”
 - ii. On the other hand, in another Bible I have (NKJV) it acknowledges that while the NU text compilers did not consider it part of the original, this material “is present in over 900 manuscripts”.
 - iii. In the Orthodox Study Bible, the footnote says that while it was missing from some early manuscripts, “it is still considered by the Church as inspired, authentic, canonical Scripture, and bears the same authority as all the other Scripture.”
 - iv. I notice that it is in the Majority Text, compiled from the largest number of manuscripts in the Western church. It was included in the Vulgate, the Latin translation made by Jerome that later became the standard for the Catholic church.
 - v. There is little mention of this passage among the early Christian writers. While Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, an early harmonization of the four gospels (c. 170 AD) provides very early support for many of the “disputed passages” questioned by modern scholars, it does not include this passage from John’s account.
 - vi. Interestingly, in one footnote in a Catholic Bible, it said that in some early manuscripts it appears *in other locations* in the gospels, such as:
 1. After **John 7:36**
 2. At end of the **gospel of John**
 3. After **Luke 21:38**
 - vii. Eusebius, writing in his *Ecclesiastical History (History of the Church)*, Book 3 chapter 39, writes about Papias (c. 60-130 AD, a disciple of the apostle John):

1. "He also gives another history of a woman, who had been accused of many sins before the Lord, which is also contained in the gospel according to the Hebrews."
 - a. Here many think this may refer to Matthew's gospel, since Papias had said that gospel was written "in the Hebrew dialect".
- viii. For those who are interested in exploring this topic further (evidences for whether **John 7:53-8:11** was in the original or should be considered inspired Scripture), I found what I thought was a good article by Brent Macdonald, posted on www.NotJustAnotherBook.com
 1. <https://notjustanotherbook.com/disputedjohn.htm#end8>

II. The Account of the Woman Caught in Adultery (Read **John 7:53-8:11**)

- a. Summary of the facts of the story
 - i. Takes place early in the morning, in temple area, where Jesus is teaching
 - ii. Scribes and Pharisees bring a woman "caught in the act of adultery" and bring her before Jesus.
 - iii. They point out that Moses taught such a person was to be stoned, and ask Jesus, "But what do You say?"
 1. This is a setup; a test. They are somehow trying to trap Jesus, to bring a charge against him.
 - iv. Rather than reply, Jesus bends down and writes something on the ground, with His finger.
 - v. Finally, after they keep asking Him, He says "He who is without sin among you, let Him cast the first stone." Then He goes back to writing on the ground.
 - vi. Everyone leaves, starting with the oldest. Only Jesus and the woman are left. None of the men stay to condemn the woman.
 - vii. Jesus tells the woman two things:
 1. "I don't condemn you, either" (very popular today); and
 2. "Go and sin no more." (*very unpopular* today)
- b. Background for this story and the trap that the men try to set for Jesus: the Law of Moses. Let's try to understand what the scribes and Pharisees were thinking.

- i. Adultery was a serious sin under the Law of Moses. The seventh commandment (as most count them) in the 10 Commandments is: "You shall not commit adultery." (**Exodus 20:14, Deuteronomy 5:18**)
- ii. Penalties for serious sins such as adultery are spelled out in the Law of Moses.
 1. Read **Leviticus 20:1-2**.
 - a. Worshiping someone other than Jehovah: penalty is being stoned to death.
 - b. Stoning is still practiced in 10-20 nations today; generally, in fundamentalist Muslim countries. The most stonings today are in Iran.
 - c. This is an especially brutal way to die. Generally, the person to be stoned is immobilized (for example, buried up to their chest) today. Then the crowd hits them with stones until they die by bleeding or concussion, which may take a long time!
 - i. No one person is responsible for the execution; it is done by the group.
 - ii. Beheading, although it may seem more dramatic, is probably a much less painful way to execute.
 2. Read **Leviticus 20:10**.
 - a. This follows the discussion about stoning the sinner.
 - b. Notice that *both the man and woman* involved in adultery are to be killed.
 3. Read **Deuteronomy 17:6-7**.
 - a. Requirement for evidence for a crime with the death penalty is high: "two or three witnesses."
 - b. Think about it: how often, when someone commits adultery, are there *two or more eye-witnesses* to the actual sin?
 - c. Perhaps that is why we don't see many people being stoned to death for adultery under the Law of Moses!

- d. The eyewitness was to cast the first stone, then followed by everyone else.
- e. The call to “put the evil away from you” is quoted later in **1 Corinthians 5:13**, where Christians are called to expel from the church the unrepentant sinners involved in sexual immorality.

III. A Few Questions Regarding this Story

- a. In *How to Read a Book*, by Adler and Van Doren, the authors challenge us to become “active readers” by asking hard questions of the text.
 - i. Unfortunately, the author of a book is generally unavailable to answer our questions (for example, the author may have been dead for a few centuries). Therefore, *we* are the ones who must do the hard work of wrestling with the text, to try to come up with the answers.
 - ii. This can be hard work, but it makes us deeper readers. It forces us to go beyond the surface.
 - iii. In my opinion, anyone who wants to be a good Bible teacher should first learn to be a good, active reader.
- b. **Question No. 1:** Why did the Scribes and Pharisees think that this would be a trap for Jesus?
 - i. Jesus knew what the Law of Moses said. Couldn't He just say, “Yes, we must stone her just as Moses said, as long as we have two or three eyewitnesses”?
 - 1. Why wouldn't Jesus say that?
 - a. Most people today think: because He was merciful and didn't want to punish her, unlike Moses who was tough on sin.
 - b. However, let us consider that further. Why would the enemies of Jesus think He would be “soft on sin”? Is there anything Jesus taught that indicated He would be easier on people than Moses was?
 - i. Actually, it seems to me that Jesus was *harder* on the people than Moses. He called them to a *higher* standard of righteousness, not a lower one! And he gave more terrifying warnings than any of the prophets before him. Consider what he said:

1. **Matthew 5:20-26**2. **Matthew 5:27-30**3. **Matthew 5:31-32**

- ii. He was a stronger preacher of repentance than even Jonah, who single-handedly brought the entire pagan city of Nineveh to repentance in sackcloth and ashes.

1. **Matthew 12:41**2. **Mark 9:42-48**3. **Luke 13:1-5**

- iii. So, if Jesus was such a strong preacher of repentance, *even tougher* on adultery than Moses (expanding the 7th commandment), why would His enemies have thought He would *take it easy on the woman*?

- 1. Think about it. Does that seem reasonable, or should we consider if there might be a more plausible explanation?

- ii. There is at least one other possible answer for why the scribes and Pharisees asked this question of Jesus.

- 1. They were trying to get Jesus in trouble with the Roman authorities, to use the government to advance their evil agenda to lock up or kill Jesus.

- 2. Consider another trap that the Jews tried to set for Jesus (that He avoided). Read **Matthew 22:15-22**.

- a. In this instance, the Pharisees and Herodians tried to set up Jesus to tell people not to pay taxes to Rome. They were trying to get him into serious trouble with the Roman rulers.

- b. Jesus never directly answered their question; but diffused it and challenged them back.

- i. He used logic and the Scriptures. He pointed to a coin and reminded them by allusion that man was made in the image of God (as stated in **Genesis 1:26**), confounding His enemies.

- ii. He was indeed “wiser than Solomon,” as He said in **Matthew 12:42**.
- 3. The Jews tried to set Jesus up as an enemy of Rome.
 - a. Read **Luke 23:1-3**.
 - i. The charge brought to Pilate: Jesus is forbidding people to pay taxes to Caesar and declaring himself king.
 - ii. This would be sedition and rebellion against Rome.
 - iii. (Similar sentiments expressed by the Jews to Pilate in **John 19:12**.)
 - b. Read **John 18:28-32**.
 - i. Pilate considered this to be a Jewish religious dispute and did not want to get involved.
 - ii. The Jews insisted that Rome deal with Him, because it was not lawful for them to put someone to death.
 - iii. It appears that at that time, under Roman rule, the Jews in Judea were not permitted to execute people. Only the Romans were authorized to exact capital punishment. Otherwise the Jews could have killed Jesus themselves, using their own legal system.
- iii. It makes sense to me that the reason for this trap was to force Jesus to say something that could be used against Him in the eyes of the Roman authorities (similar to the trap question regarding paying taxes, in **Matthew 22**).
 - 1. It appears to me that the scribes and Pharisees were presenting Jesus with two bad options.
 - a. EITHER He follows the Law of Moses *and thereby violates Roman law* (by ordering the woman to be stoned), hence getting in trouble with the Romans; OR
 - b. He submits to Roman law *but violates the Law of Moses* (by saying that the woman *should not* be stoned), breaking a command in the word of God and discrediting himself with the Jews.

- c. (This was the trap they set: Jesus would lose either way!)
- 2. You may conclude otherwise. However, that seems the most reasonable explanation to me.
- c. **Question No. 2:** What was Jesus writing on the ground, with His finger?
 - i. I will admit there is no way to know; it doesn't say here.
 - ii. I assume it was something related to what was going on. Also, Jesus always used the Scriptures and logic to disarm his enemies. So first thing I would think of is that He was writing something from the Jewish Scriptures. Maybe something that would convict his enemies? Maybe tied to why they walked away when He challenged them?
 - iii. You can think of some possibilities. Here are my thoughts:
 - 1. He could have written out the 10 Commandments.
 - a. That is where it says, "You shall not commit adultery". However, it gets even tougher at the end of the list. Consider the 10th Commandment. Read **Deuteronomy 5:18-21**.
 - b. Being a false witness also violates the 10 Commandments.
 - c. While probably most of them had not committed adultery, I suspect that all of them would have been guilty of violating the last commandment: coveting.
 - d. That is still a tough one. Not coveting someone else's wife, husband, house, car, job, bank account, looks, possessions!
 - e. It makes a point of saying that Jesus was writing with his finger. The other thing I think of as being written with someone's finger was the 10 Commandments: *written by the finger of God!* (**Exodus 31:18**, **Deuteronomy 9:10**)
 - i. (Following this lesson, a few people brought up another, similar example of fingers writing: the mysterious hand writing on the wall in **Daniel 5**.)
 - 2. He could have written out **Leviticus 20:10**, which says that both the man and woman were to be stoned.

- a. Where was *the man*?
- 3. He could have written out **Deuteronomy 17:6-7** where it says you need two or three witnesses to stone someone.
 - a. Did they have two or more eyewitnesses?
 - b. If they did, then *those eyewitnesses would have to be the first ones* to cast the stones (and risk getting themselves in trouble with the Roman rulers).

IV. Lessons from This Story

- a. Most people today want to camp out on the first half of **John 8:11**, where Jesus says, "Neither am I to condemn you."
 - i. Pope Francis was celebrated in the media for his "Who am I to judge?" statement a few years ago, regarding homosexuality.
 - ii. Tolerance and relativism are considered practically the highest values in the modern world, seeping even into the Christian world.
 - iii. We forget Jesus' closing challenge to the woman: "go and sin no more."
 - 1. Similar to what Jesus had told the crippled man who was healed:
 - a. "Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, 'See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.'" (**John 5:14**, NKJV)
- b. The challenge: to balance these two statements of Jesus to the woman. The church over the ages has tended to drift to either harshness toward sinners or laxity (the second being overwhelmingly the case today).
 - i. The earliest quote from this story in John that I found was in a work called *Didascalia Apostolorum*; or *Teaching of the Apostles*. This work was written perhaps around 230 AD.
 - 1. This is a practical work, telling how to implement things.
 - 2. It provides detailed instructions to bishops/ overseers in how to govern the church. Some of the advice given to the bishops:
 - a. They are called to be watchmen, to warn the flock. (**Ezekiel 33:1-9**)
 - b. They are called to "count the flock" like good shepherds, and to go after those who stray (consider **Luke 15:4-7**).

- c. They are called to have the heart of the good shepherd held up in **Ezekiel 34**.
 - i. Feeding the sheep with good pasture and pure water.
 - ii. Strengthening the weak.
 - iii. Reviving the sick; binding up the broken.
 - iv. Preparing the strong for labor.
 - v. Bringing back those who have strayed.
- d. The bishops/ overseers are called to be stern and rebuke those in sin.
- e. However, when the sinners repent, the overseers must be merciful, forgiving and restoring them.
 - i. This has been a serious problem at certain times of church history: leaders being harsh and unmerciful.
 - ii. In the *Didascalia* the overseers are reminded that God does not want any to perish. He is happy to forgive the wicked who repent. (**Ezekiel 33:10-20**)
 - iii. The example of king Manasseh is used to illustrate someone wicked who repented and was restored at the end. This is based on **2 Kings 21** and especially **2 Chronicles 33**. It also cites the Prayer of Manasseh, which is included at the end of **2 Chronicles 36** in the LXX.
 - iv. Finally, the overseers are pointed to the example of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery. From near the end of chapter 7 of the *Didascalia*:
 - 1. “Wherefore, O bishop, so far as you can, keep those that have not sinned, that they may continue without sinning; and those that repent of (their) sins heal and receive. But if thou receive not him who repents, because you are without mercy, you shall sin against the Lord God; for you do not obey our Savior and our God, to do

as He also did with her that had sinned, whom the elders set before Him, and leaving the judgement in His hands, departed.

2. But He, the Searcher of hearts, asked her and said to her: "Have the elders condemned thee, my daughter?" She saith to him: "No, Lord. And he said to her: Go thy way: neither do I condemn you."
 3. In Him therefore, our Savior and King and God, be your pattern, O bishops, and imitate Him, that you may be quiet and meek, and merciful and compassionate, and peacemakers, and without anger, and teachers and correctors and receivers and exhorters; and that you be not wrathful, nor tyrannical; and that you be not insolent, nor haughty, nor boastful."
- c. Let us maintain a balanced and accurate picture of Jesus, who extended grace to an adulterous woman AND called her to stop sinning.
- i. May we follow His example in all aspects: calling ourselves and others to turn away from sin; yet comforting, forgiving and encouraging those sinners who repent.