

Research on the **Woman Taken in Adultery**

John 8:1-12

According to rabbinical law a husband could not commit adultery against his wife, for adultery was understood to be sexual relations between a married woman and a man other than her husband. “The ministry of Jesus was highly instrumental in elevating the status of women. His approach to marriage and divorce, in particular, set a higher moral standard for all classes and societies, and thereby provided a higher degree of protection for women against the evil tendencies of human vice, as well as a higher degree of responsibility for wives in the maintenance of successful and godly marriages” (Massey 40).

“The story of the woman caught in adultery, while probably not a part of the earliest and best text of the NT, is still included in most modern translations, albeit often in the margins. It is difficult to explain how this narrative ever forced its way into any of the canonical Gospels unless there were strong reasons for assuming that it was authentic Jesus material” (Witherington, *Ministry* 21).

The story interrupts the text between John 7:53 and 8:12. But “it is undoubtedly of ancient date and in content evinces the character of an authentic tradition, not that of a fictitious story. Here we have such a precious and . . . historically authentic tradition from the life of Jesus that not only does its place in the Fourth Gospel have to be maintained but also exposition of it rightly remains in most commentaries on John” (Ridderbos 286, 287).

1 Jesus went unto the mount of Olives.

This is the only time the phrase “mount of Olives” is used in the Gospel of John.

2 And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.

The setting for the story is in the Court of Women in the Temple. The time frame is probably Jesus’ last visit to Jerusalem before the crucifixion. This event probably occurred during either the Feast of Dedication or Final Passover.

3 And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

In verse 3 the story begins. This is the only time the word “scribes” is used in the Gospel of John. “The issue is one of law, but in a very concrete way. The woman has been caught committing adultery and stands accused in the midst of her accusers” (Ridderbos 287).

“*A woman*. A married woman, adultery in the Law being concerned with unfaithfulness on the part of the *wife*, and not with affairs between husbands and unmarried women” (*AYB John i-xii*. 333).

4 They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

“Those who ask Jesus for his opinion on what to do with the woman place all the emphasis on her having been caught in the act” (Ridderbos 287). The Gospel does not give the woman’s name, but her guilt is irrefutable. She was caught in the act and now stands before her accusers – facing death for breaking the seventh commandment. The accusers bring no eyewitnesses to verify the accusation.

The word *Master* or *Teacher* is mentioned only once in the Gospel of John. Its use contains a lot of irony since the motive of the woman’s accusers is to undermine Jesus’ teaching.

5 Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

“The penalty for adultery was death for both the man and the woman (Lev. 20: 10; Deut. 22: 21-24). Stoning was the most common way in which the death penalty was carried out in Israel. Hence the question that the Pharisees and scribes posed to Jesus did not arise from any perplexity on their part over whether they should apply this cruel punishment or from any need for advice, but because they wanted to hear from him an opinion that did not accord with the law. They questioned him on account of his attitude toward people like this woman and because of their own annoyance that such people listened to Jesus. This intention is expressly brought out in vs. 6a: they asked him so that they might have some charge to bring against him before the Jewish court. If he would take a stand for the woman, he would thus, in their opinion, be in open conflict with Moses” (Ridderbos 287-288). Their question was asked in order to trap Jesus by having him say something contrary to the Law.

The woman’s accusers speak as if the Mosaic Law required only the woman to be punished. They completely ignore the man’s participation in the act and the fact that the law demands punishment for him also.

6 This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.

The atmosphere is highly volatile at this point. Jesus does not challenge the accusation against the woman. If he refuses to condemn her, he could be charged with contradicting the Law, and that would put him in the position of being condemned also. If he pronounces judgment on her, he will appear to usurp the Roman’s right to execute her.

Jesus appears to totally ignore their question and begins to write something on the ground. “He attracted attention away from the woman. He did something strange, unusual. While all around

him anxiously awaited his answer, with the woman standing in their midst as the sinner ‘caught in the act,’ he turned away from all the commotion and stooped toward the ground, silently drawing letters or figures as if to keep himself occupied. Jesus seems to have been completely disregarding the urgency of the question and the case” (Ridderbos 289-290).

“In the Mediterranean world of Jesus’ time, such an act of writing would have been recognized as an act of refusal and disengagement” (NIBC 9.629).

“Although the Gospel record does not say so, we may well guess that some voice may have been raised asking, ‘Master, what are you writing?’ or that someone from the back may have echoed it saying: ‘What is he doing? Why doesn’t somebody tell us what he is doing?’ The woman, still encircled by her accusers, though afraid, seemed forgotten. The men’s curiosity increased, as they looked around with puzzled expressions, their fingers still clutching the stones” (Sergio 51).

7 So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

“[Jesus’] interrogators refused to accept such a delay and pressed him for an answer. In response to this display of impatience Jesus straightened up. For only a moment he interrupted his work of writing on the ground in order, with a word, to bring home to them the disgraceful and precarious nature of their conduct. All right, then, you zealots for the law, ‘let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.’ There lies the challenge. Jesus continues to use the language of the law. For there it was stipulated (Deut. 13:9; 17:7) that the witnesses of a capital crime were to be first to turn their hand against the guilty person” (Ridderbos 290).

8 And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

“Jesus’ resumption of writing on the ground indicates that he is finished with the scribes and Pharisees” (NIBC 9.629).

9 And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

The Master is forcing the accusers to be accountable for their own actions and look within their own conscience. If they condemn her, they condemn themselves. The witnesses may be technically qualified to throw stones, but they are not morally qualified (Witherington, *Genesis* 40). Is this the first time these men had had their guilt revealed in public?

“[Jesus] did not so much as look up until they had left, beginning with the oldest, who understood that they had to be the first by giving an example. Jesus then was left with the woman, who still stood there as the accused” (Ridderbos 290).

10 When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

This is the first time the woman is addressed in the narrative. Jesus speaks to a woman – a sinner – in public. “The question seems needless; still it is without a trace of irony or gloating; it serves only to bring home to the woman the full reality of the fact that she no longer had to fear anything from those who had threatened her life” (Ridderbos 290).

11 She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus aid unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

Now we hear the only words she will speak in the story: “No man, Lord.”

“Condemn is used in the legal sense of ‘sentence.’ Only now does Jesus answer the question put to him at the beginning: ‘Teacher . . . what do *you* say?’ But he speaks not as a rabbi giving an opinion in a matter concerning the law but as one who has power ‘on earth to forgive sins’ (Luke 5:24) and ‘to set at liberty those who are oppressed’ (Luke 4:19)” (Ridderbos 291).

“Jesus words to the woman also appear in John 5:14 and seem to have the same meaning in both places. Jesus does not speak of what is required for acquittal (healing in 5:14) but urges that the acquittal that is freely given become the beginning point for a new life” (NIBC 9.629).

“[Jesus] had shown how to handle and overcome the power of violent emotions, how to transform spite into reason, vindictiveness into compassion, arrogance into forgiveness. Since all of this had to come about because of a woman’s near-fatal plight, the implications seem intended particularly for woman to perceive and to understand” (Sergio 56).

12 Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

“Jesus professed to be not only the inexhaustible source of spiritual nourishment, but he also was the genuine light by which truth and falsehood could be distinguished and by which direction could be established. Perhaps Jesus drew his illustration from the great candlestick or Menorah that was lighted during the Feast of Tabernacles and cast its light over the Court of the Women where Jesus was teaching. The Menorah was to be extinguished after the feast, but his light would remain” (EBC, Accordance).

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Abbreviation key:

AYB = *The Anchor Yale Bible*

EBC = *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*

NIBC = *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*