

“Guilty Accusers” (Jn. 7:53-8:11)

1. Jesus and the Accusers (7:53-8:6a)
 - a. Their Attempted Trap (53-3)
 - i. Jesus has sat on the Mount of Olives and was teaching (vv. 53-2).
 - ii. Scribes and Pharisees interrupt with a sensational scene (3).
 - b. Their Blatant Hypocrisy (4-6a)
 - i. They caught her in the “very act” (4) which means they had to have witnessed her partner – which was conveniently absent.
 - ii. They said that Moses commanded stoning for such and then ask Jesus, “But what do you say,” as they were trying to accuse Him (5-6a).
 - iii. Lev. 20:10 and Deut. 22:22-24 deal with adulterous situations which involve capital punishment. Although they think they are standing on the ground of Scripture, they fail to display any righteousness or integrity e.g.:
 1. They conveniently ignore the fact that both adulterers are guilty and thus both must be punished equally.
 2. I believe this was hardly a dilemma for Jesus as the Law condemned malicious/conspiratorial accusers as much as it did the adulterers (Ex. 23:1; Deut. 19:16-18).
 3. Furthermore, Jesus showed compassion not unlike Israelites who often (if not always) allowed for lesser sentences for such crimes. Therefore death was the maximum penalty but other compensations were available. Nevertheless, they desired to put Jesus in a dilemma of sorts by getting him to either show mercy thus appearing to contradict the fulfilment of the Law or push him to the fulfilment of approving capital punishment and thus pit him against his own mercy and that of his followers and other Jews.
 4. As many evil plots prove, they have not considered the integrity of the truth!
 5. They did not consider the repercussions of the woman and only used her as a prop in their evil plan to defame Jesus. Their motives were for destruction and deception, not for edification and truth!
 6. It is doubtful that they just happened upon an adulterous act and John indicates clearly that they did what they did in order to “have something for which to accuse him.” This means that they must have known about the act before it happened and thus could have warned the woman but they did not! Therefore they wished it to happen and then used (if not perversely promoted) the act in order to defame Jesus. To have opportunity to prevent or warn others regarding sin and not do so is sin.
 7. Therefore, they are like contemporary politicians who exploit souls for personal gain and promote evil to pretend righteousness. I’ll repeat. The vilest of evil acts have been done in the guise of virtue. E.g.:
 - a. Abortion because it’s the woman’s body and she ought to choose instead of obsolete, fundamentalist Christians.
 - b. We ought not to build border walls because such is prejudice.
 - c. You must be ‘tolerant’ and not express your religion if it offends.
 - d. Or how about this one? “Judge not lest ye be judged.” This is commonly misused verse in order to appear innocent or avoid guilt. →
 - e. Jesus was the One who is conveniently quoted out of context and He is the one employing those verses in this passage. →

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- f. Read Mat. 7:1-5 & Jn. 7:24. Jesus is making right judgments and inferring their guilt and hypocrisy for judging unrighteously. Bruce Milne sums it up this way, “The sword of judgment is double-edged. In judging others we judge ourselves, and an unwillingness to pronounce judgment on ourselves undercuts our right to pronounce it on others. Put more generally, God’s call to all of us, all of the time, is to live holy, godly lives. *Any* deviation from that should concern us, as much in ourselves as in others.”¹
- c. Jesus’ Terse Response (6b-9a)
 - i. Speculation can be dangerous but also helpful if it is harmonized. The KJV adds to v. 6 that Jesus ignored them as he wrote with His finger on the sand.
 - ii. Some have even suggested Jesus was doodling as if uninterested in their accusations and insincere inquiries. Many have offered speculative verses which Jesus may have written with His finger. Not unlike the correlation with His sitting and teaching on the mount to God’s authoritative Word & Law, Jesus’ writing with His finger may correlate to the finger of God – and thus it could indicate that the Word personified in Christ was writing the revealed Word of God with the finger of God. Whatever He wrote was written by God (did God doodle?). Also see Lu. 11:20.
 - 1. Some have suggested Jer. 17:13 (read) or even personal names who have sinned in like manner. “God wrote the Ten Commandments with his finger (Ex 31:18; Deut 9:10); perhaps Jesus writes the first line of the tenth commandment in the Septuagint of Exodus 20: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” This text would declare them all guilty of adultery (Mt 5:28).”²
 - 2. Others have suggested Deut. 17:7 which put the onus on the accusers/witnesses to do the stoning. Or other verses like we’ve already considered could have been written. No one knows.
 - iii. What seems apparent is that Jesus was not respecting them enough to jump up or immediately respond to them. Also, they seemed not to pay attention to his writing as they persisted to demand an answer. After all, they were not teachable so they were only interested in trapping Jesus.
 - iv. Therefore, Jesus stands and says something that would immediately terminate the debate and their demands (7).
 - v. He referred to the very Law they attempted to exploit. “This is a direct reference to Deuteronomy 13:9; 17:7 (*cf.* Lv. 24:14)—the witnesses of the crime must be the first to throw the stones, and they must not be participants in the crime itself.”³ But they were involved in the crime – glad to see it and/or promote it for their purpose.
 - vi. We have already seen that the accusers seemingly failed to warn the adulterers having set up the trap thus breaking the Law prohibiting such a malicious witness. Furthermore, it was not Jesus’ prerogative to do the stoning. It was not He but they

¹ Milne, B. (1993). [*The message of John: here is your king!: with study guide*](#) (p. 125). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² Keener, C. S. (1993). [*The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament*](#) (Jn 8:6–8). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

³ Carson, D. A. (1991). [*The Gospel according to John*](#) (p. 336). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

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who testified to witnessing such and thus had the duty to initiate a stoning if such were to be sentenced.

- vii. They were hell bent on trapping Jesus and thus made certain they could catch her in the act so as to lack no evidence for an accusation that would stick. However, their malicious intent overlooked their own violations of the pertinent law regarding its procedure (the accusers stone first) and more importantly, its impetus (their plotting Ex. 23:6-7 cf. Mic. 2:1). They cared nothing for the woman or her husband (if married). They cared nothing for the Law’s intent and safeguards or its righteousness. They cared only for discrediting Jesus and would do whatever it took to do it.
- viii. Vv. 8-9: He stooped down again to write and they began to exit from oldest to younger. Perhaps some who suggest a possible doodling in the sand do so because He seemed to stoop back down continuing to draw or write (perhaps as if he was just waiting for them to get the message and begin to leave).

2. Jesus and the Accused (9b-11)

- a. The accusers left the woman alone apparently in the midst of those already gathered beforehand (9b).
- b. He asked her... (10). I wonder how it sounded. “Where *are* those accusers of yours? Has *no one* condemned you?”
- c. To her (assumed) relief, she answered yet Jesus did not let her off the hook at it were. He did not say that she was innocent due to no standing accusers but that He did not condemn her either but to “go and sin no more.” Leave your life of sin because judgement will come to all and Jesus is the Judge! See 5:14! *We even sin without thought at times because we are so self-absorbed. Because of Corona virus, 2020 high school grads did not attend a ceremony. I noticed that social media was suddenly filled with older people posting their graduation pics. It’s insult to injury. It’s like, sorry you couldn’t experience this but look at me again! My second celebration will help you deal with losing your lost celebration.
- d. So the woman may not have been condemned then and there, but she was reminded that an ultimate judgment is coming.
- e. More than anyone and necessarily so, Jesus must evaluate sin (cf. 8:11; cf. 5:14; 8:21, 24; 9:41; 15:22; 16:8–9).
- f. Consider this also. She witnessed Jesus find fault with her accusers and thus if the Judge finds fault with those assoc./w the Temple – how much fault could He find in her? →
- g. But sinners such as her are exactly those for whom Jesus came and took on our sin debt!
- h. Although we live among many accusers (perhaps you have played the part), there is only one Judge and He has given us the option to pay for our sins, or receive His payment for them.
- i. Satan and the Pharisees are hypocritical accusers. Nevertheless, the righteous Law of God stands as true accuser of sin. God’s Word, the Prophets, our consciences, and Christ the King stand over all and judge righteously. And on Judgment Day, all who are in Christ will be declared innocent because our sins have been paid in full by Jesus and removed from us as far as east from west.
- j. Again Milne sums it up: “Here is the miracle of the grace of God. There is no greater wonder than this. The turning of water into wine, the healing of a dying lad by a word, the feeding of five thousand and more with a snack lunch, the walking on a storm-tossed sea; none of these, nor all of them together, compares with this, that Jesus said *neither do I condemn you*. In this

sentence, and in the heart of mercy which lay behind it, is all our hope and all our salvation for ever.”⁴

Further Study

Authenticity and Placement of this Pericope (section of Scripture)

For most in the church, Protestants (including the present writer) and Roman Catholics alike, this pericope is regarded as being fully canonical, even though it has been understood by textual scholars for centuries to be out of place.² Our oldest manuscripts of John do not contain this text, and it is conspicuously absent not only from the early eastern Greek texts and versions, such as the Syriac and Coptic, but also no eastern Church Father commenting on John makes any mention of the story during the first nine centuries of the Christian era. In the west during the first three centuries the situation was not much different, though by the fourth and fifth centuries the story found its way into Codex Bezae and into a number of later Greek and old Latin manuscripts. Yet even some of these manuscripts contain sigla indicating the doubtful nature of the pericope’s placement. While the earliest western Church Fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian do not mention the pericope, it is found in the works of Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome.⁵

Whatever one may think of the appropriateness of the story of the woman caught in adultery at this point in John’s Gospel, its opening verses make it difficult to view the story as anything but a part of some Gospel somewhere—whether John or Luke or an apocryphal Gospel. Efforts to understand it as a unit complete in itself or as a free-floating piece of tradition are unconvincing because of this clear link to a preceding narrative of some kind. If the disputed passage were 8:3–11, such a theory would make sense, for those verses could conceivably stand alone. But 7:53–8:11 do not stand alone, and it is not hard to understand why most scribes felt compelled to place them somewhere within the text, whether here, or after 7:36 or 7:44, or after Luke 21:38.¹⁴⁹ The pattern of days teaching in the temple and nights spent on the Mount of Olives is thoroughly in keeping with passion week, according to Luke (see 19:47; 21:37–38; 22:39). Yet despite striking similarities in vocabulary between these verses and Luke 21:37–38, the link is tenuous because placing these verses after Luke 21:38 would be highly redundant.¹⁵⁰ Possibly

⁴ Milne, B. (1993). *The message of John: here is your king!: with study guide* (p. 126). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² For textual issues see Metzger, *TCGNT*, 219–22; *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, ed. K. Aland, 3rd Eng. ed. (Stuttgart: UBS, 1979), 208–9; Z. Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John. Part 8: The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11): The Text,” *BSac* 136 (1979): 318–32; B. Newman, “ ‘Verses marked with brackets ...,’ ” *BT* 30 (1979): 233–36.

⁵ Borchert, G. L. (1996). *John 1–11* (Vol. 25A, pp. 369–370). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁴⁹ The placement of the passage at the very end of John’s Gospel, after 21:25 (in a number of later manuscripts known as Family 1), seems to have been a counsel of despair, without attention to context, motivated simply by a concern that the story not be lost.

¹⁵⁰ One has only to put them side by side (with the verbal similarities in italics) to sense the redundancy: “Days he was *teaching in the temple*, and nights he would go out and lodge on the *Mount that was called Olives*, and *all the people* would come to him *in the morning* in the temple to hear him (Luke). And they went off, each to his house, while Jesus went off to the *Mount of Olives*. *In the morning* he again showed up at the *temple*, and *all the people* were coming to him, and he sat and began *teaching* them” (Woman caught in adultery). While Luke describes Jesus’ customary or repeated practice during his last week on earth, the story preserved here describes one *particular* night and morning. The redundancy is alleviated somewhat if it is assumed that Luke 21:37–38 was “composed to fill the gap caused by the removal of this paragraph” (Barrett, 589), that is, that it originally followed 21:36, so that those who “went off, each to his house” are those to whom he was speaking in 21:5–36, presumably his own disciples.

they come from a lost passion account resembling Luke in certain respects, yet clearly the scribes who placed the passage here in John’s Gospel did so for a reason. Even though the phrase “all the people”¹⁵¹—instead of “the crowd,” or “the crowds”—is far more familiar to Luke’s readers than to John’s (see Lk 1:10; 2:10, 31; 3:21; 6:17; 7:29; 8:47; 9:13; 18:43; 19:48; 20:6, 45; 21:38; 24:19), what is important to John’s readers is that the next day Jesus “began teaching,” just as he had done at the Tent festival (see 7:14), and that the incident in question happens as part of his teaching ministry.⁶

Like the context in which this event is placed, the accusers are guilty and the accused is vindicated and escapes being stoned (8:9-10, 59). Those who come to shame Jesus, leave in their own shame.

Jesus as divine seated authority:

The picture of Jesus sitting while teaching (8:2) is a familiar Synoptic representation of the authority of Jesus. In Matthew the picture of Jesus sitting also is linked with a mountain setting, reflecting both the seated God (cf. Dan 7:9; the Ancient of Days seated on the clouds) and the God of the Mountain (the mountain being a special place to meet God: cf. Abraham and Isaac in Moriah later identified with the Temple Mount, Gen 22:2; Moses and Mount Horeb, Exod 3:1; and Elijah on Mount Carmel, 1 Kgs 18:21). In Matthew Jesus is indeed the mountain-seated teacher (5:1 and 24:3) and the mountain-seated healer (15:29–30). In Luke Jesus begins his seated role at an early age in the presence of the learned legalists of the Jews (2:46), and his seated position also is mentioned in connection with his teaching role during the period of his ministry (5:3). The Johannine evangelist also seems to reflect a knowledge of this idea in the teaching-feeding event (6:3), although Schnackenburg denies such a role in John. He says that in the Fourth Gospel Jesus only stands and cries (7:37).^{6*} Because the sitting posture became identified as a position of authority, the rabbis desired to sit in the seat of Moses (cf. Matt 23:2); and even the disciples, like James and John, desired the special seats of authority next to Jesus in the kingdom (cf. Mark 10:37, 40). In this present story Jesus is the seated teacher on the Temple Mount (8:2).⁷

Adultery and the Law in Jesus’ day:

But even beyond the matter of legal entrapment, Carson likely is correct in suggesting that stoning for adultery probably was not used much in the time of Jesus.¹⁰ The old law probably was quite unpopular with the people. Enforcement of such ethical standards by severe punishment patterns was quite selective at best. And given the Roman jurisdiction in capital matters, it was much easier to sue for a Jewish divorce than to break the Roman Peace directive in mob violence (though Derrett¹¹ reminds us that lynch laws often by-passed the more formal laws of capital punishment; cf. the Stephen story in Acts 7:54–60). One must not forget, however, that with rabbis like Hillel divorce could be obtained by a husband for virtually any reason including some dislike of the husband for the wife.¹² Accordingly,

¹⁵¹ Gr. πᾶς ὁ λαός.

⁶ Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (pp. 494–495). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

^{6*} R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, trans. C. Hastings et al. (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 2.163.

⁷ Borchert, G. L. (1996). *John 1–11* (Vol. 25A, p. 372). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁰ D. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 335.

¹¹ See J. D. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), 167–68.

¹² The rabbis forcefully debated the just cause for divorce. Shammai and his followers argued for a strict interpretation of indecency as being moral indecency whereas Hillel and his followers argued for a more lenient perspective including almost any reason. The lenient perspective is recognized in the *Book of Sirach* (25:26), where it says that if a wife disobeys her

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marital faithfulness in the time of Jesus was not totally observed. For men especially divorce and remarriage were always options. But with Jesus it was different so that even his disciples were stunned by his standard of long-term faithfulness to the marriage contract (cf. Matt 19:10).⁸

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This jewel of a passage has mystery and debate about where and whether or not it should be in our Bibles. However, scholars for centuries have agreed and acknowledged that its place in the canon is appropriate. It may seem a bit or a lot disjointed, but the surrounding verses in John (it’s sometimes placed after Luke 21:38) could indicate its more natural place. No matter where it best fits, its authenticity is acknowledged throughout Christendom. This passage both warns the trappings of sin (especially of the accusers) and the mercy and compassion of God (especially to the outcasts). Jesus is compassionate but His love and mercy never come at the expense of His righteous judgment. Justice delayed is not justice denied. Justice delayed allows for mercy to be applied.

husband he can “cut her off.” For a helpful discussion of the perspectives on divorce in the time of Jesus see C. Blomberg’s commentary *Matthew*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 110–12.

⁸ Borchert, G. L. (1996). [*John 1–11*](#) (Vol. 25A, pp. 373–374). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.