

The woman taken in adultery, John 8. 2-11.¹ Bethesda Coffee Morning, 3 June 2015.

This morning we continue with our series of talks about Bible characters who feature in the gospels of the New Testament. Last week we met a man whose name we do not know and whom I could then best describe as 'the man at the foot of the Mount of the Transfiguration'. This week we meet a woman whose name we do not know, and whose encounter with Jesus is found in the fourth Gospel, the Gospel according to John, chapter 8. The passage reads:

Early in the morning, Jesus came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and having sat down, He began to teach them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman who had been caught in adultery, and having stood her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, we found this woman committing adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in our law, commanded to stone such.² Therefore what do you say?" This they said, testing Him,³ that they might have an accusation against Him.⁴

But Jesus, stooping down, began to write on the ground⁵ with His finger.⁶

And when they continued asking Him, He lifted Himself up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first⁷ to cast a stone at her".⁸

And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.⁹

But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last.¹⁰ And Jesus was left alone, with the woman standing in the midst.

And Jesus, lifting Himself up and seeing no one but the woman, said to her, "Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?"

And she said, "No one, Lord". And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you;¹¹ go, and sin no more".¹²

Well, that narrative certainly leaves my curiosity unsatisfied on many scores. What, for instance, was the woman's story? Given that, on the testimony of the scribes and Pharisees, she had been caught committing 'adultery', was she married herself, or was it that the man she went with was married, or were they both married?¹³ Was theirs a long-standing relationship or just a casual 'one-night-affair'? Is it relevant that, according to the preceding passage, our incident took place at the close of one of the three greatest annual Jewish feasts,¹⁴ when many thousands of men from all over Israel would have travelled to Jerusalem to stay for little more than a week?

And why did the accusing scribes and Pharisees not drag the man – whoever he was – before Jesus along with the woman? For unquestionably the adulterous man was no less guilty than this woman – and arguably more so. For the Law of Moses to which they so readily appealed explicitly pronounced the death sentence on both the guilty parties. Oh yes, my inquisitiveness raises question after question.

But, alas for me, my curiosity must remain unsatisfied on all of these scores, and I have no choice but to accept that the Holy Spirit has told us all we need to know; namely, that, by the standards of God's law, this woman was most certainly guilty. The scribes and Pharisees knew it, Jesus knew it (hence the words which close our passage, His directive that she 'sin no more'), and – equally important – she knew it. The woman was in no position to argue her case or to plead innocent to the charge made against her. She had no defence to offer, and knew full well that she stood before the Lord guilty and worthy of condemnation.

But my curiosity refuses to rest. What – it wants to know – did the Lord Jesus write on the ground on those two occasions when He stooped to do that? Well, I can tell you that that question has plagued the minds of Bible students now for the best part of 2,000 years. But this morning I can confidently give you a profound theological answer: I don't know – and neither does anyone else!

And so again I must rest content with the knowledge that God's word tells me all that I need to know; namely, not *what* He wrote, but *that* He wrote and *with what* He wrote.¹⁵ For it would be difficult for us to miss the two clear statements: 'Jesus, stooping down, began to write on the ground with His finger', and, 'again He stooped down and wrote on the ground'. Here then was One who twice wrote '*with His finger*'.¹⁶ And *that* most certainly rings bells with anyone familiar with the Old Testament.

Turning to that Old Testament, let me quote first from chapter 31 of the Book of Exodus. There we read that¹⁷ the Lord God 'gave to Moses, when He had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tables of ... stone, *written with the finger of God*'.¹⁸ These two stone tables were inscribed with the Ten Commandments. But that event was followed quickly by the infamous 'Molten Calf incident', which itself led to Moses smashing both tables

of the Law. I'll let Moses tell the story in his own words – addressed to his idolatrous people: 'I turned and came down from the mountain ... and the two tables of the covenant were in my ... hands. And I saw, and behold, you had sinned against the Lord your God: you had made for yourselves a molten calf ... And I seized the two tables, and cast them out of my ... hands, and broke them before your eyes'.¹⁹

I suppose you could say, with your tongue in your cheek, that Moses was the only man ever to break all ten commandments in one go!

But, seriously, Moses immediately fell on his face before the Lord and interceded for the sinful people ... and God mercifully heard his prayer for them. Shortly after, as Moses reported it, 'the Lord said to me: "Hew for yourself two tables of stone like the first, and come up to me into the mountain... and I will write on the tables the words that were in the first tables which you broke"'.²⁰ It would be hard to miss God's double emphasis there: '*Hew for yourself* two tables of stone ... the first tables *which you broke*'. Clearly, as in many china shops, all breakages had to be paid for. And consequently on this second occasion Moses was required himself to provide the replacement set of stone tables. 'Then', we read, 'Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tables ... in his hand ... The tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tables'.²¹

Well, at least two things spring out of this. First, that, although the law truly *was* 'given *through* Moses',²² it did not originate with Moses – that both initially and ultimately, it came from God. So the scribes and Pharisees were not strictly accurate when they claimed that '*Moses, in our law, commanded to stone such*'. Apart from any other consideration,²³ *that* command had come from *God Himself*.

And the second point which flows out of the Old Testament law being written twice 'with the finger of God' is that, when, according to our passage for today, the Lord Jesus stooped twice²⁴ 'to write on the ground with His finger',²⁵ in effect He was correcting the claim made by the scribes and Pharisees, and was asserting that in the final analysis the ancient command to punish with death 'both the adulterer and the adulteress'²⁶ had been His own command.

He therefore, and He alone, had the right, not only as the Sinless One to execute that law and to cast the deadly stones at the woman, but also as the Lawgiver, if He would, to extend grace to her and to set her free from any condemnation.²⁷ Which, as we read, He did! Not, of course, that He in any way attempted to deny, disguise, excuse or condone her sin – hence His declaration, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and *sin no more*'.²⁸ Yes, indeed, as John had noted for our benefit in the very opening section of his gospel, though (and I quote) '*the law was given through Moses*', '*grace*' as well as '*truth came through Jesus Christ*'.²⁹

It was free grace as far as the sinful woman was concerned. But it was not 'free grace' as far as He was concerned. Jesus didn't condemn this woman because He knew full well that not many days later He would Himself be condemned *for her*. Some people present might well have grumbled that day that sin – that her sin – should be paid for. But it *was* to be paid for – paid for in full on a Roman cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem when Jesus died.

This is what the apostle Paul meant, when he wrote some twenty years later,³⁰ 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law (from the law we had broken) by becoming a curse for us--for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"'.³¹ And I emphasise '*a curse for us*', because, whether we like to admit it or not, we have each broken – have each violated – God's law in some respect of other ... and done so many times. And just as this woman we have nothing to plead in our defence. The Bible makes it clear that in God's courtroom every mouth is stopped and the whole world stands – and I quote – '*guilty before God*'.

Our only hope of salvation rests on Christ alone, and on our trust in Him alone. For then, and then alone, can we rejoice with the apostle Paul that '*there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*'.³²

Footnotes

¹ I leave aside all matters of textual criticism, which are well summarised at ...

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_and_the_woman_taken_in_adultery.

(The key article by Zane Hodges appeared in *Bibliotheca Sacra* – ‘The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11)’, *Bibliotheca Sacra*—V137 #545—Jan 80—50 etc. Don Carson opines, ‘Despite the best efforts of Zane Hodges to prove that this narrative was originally part of John’s Gospel, the evidence is against him, and modern English versions are right to rule it off from the rest of the text (NIV) or to relegate it to a footnote (RSV)’, ‘The Gospel according to John’, in the Pillar Commentary series, page 333.)

For my part, although it is somewhat dated, I am content to rest with Mr Darby’s comment : ‘When I find such facts as this — two leaves torn out of Veronensis — a translation made in the second century, and a MS as early perhaps as any we have, so that what precedes is lost too — in order to take away John 8:1-11; gaps left in others designedly, and Augustine telling us of copies of little credit leaving out for the sake of morality — *these documentary evidences do not suffice to shew it an interpolation*’. JND, *Collected Writings*, volume 13, page 205.

I note that the Greek expression in verse 6, ‘*τουτο δε ελεγον πειραζοντες αυτον*’, is very similar to that found in chapter 6 ‘*τουτο δε ελεγεν πειραζων αυτον*’ (verse 6); cf. John 12. 33. Significantly, such Greek constructions do not appear outside of the Gospel according to John.

² “It is a terrible thing for a sinner to fall into the hands of his fellow sinners”, F. B. Meyer (with his eye no doubt on Heb. 10. 31.). http://www.preceptaustin.org/gospel_of_john-f_b_meyer-3.htm

(They didn’t really want to stone the woman; they wanted to stone Him, John 8. 59.)

³ I note that the Greek expression in verse 6, ‘*τουτο δε ελεγον πειραζοντες αυτον*’, is very similar to that found in chapter 6 ‘*τουτο δε ελεγεν πειραζων αυτον*’ (verse 6); cf. John 12. 33.

⁴ It was a trap. The woman had been caught. But in reality she was not the catch—she was only the bait. She was just a pawn in a bigger game, a means to an end to trap the Lord Jesus. If Jesus contradicted the law of Moses, His credibility would have been instantly undermined with the people. He would have been dismissed and denounced as a lawless person. If He upheld the law, He would not only be supporting an unpopular position, it would have also put Him at odds with the Roman authorities if the sentence were executed (John 18. 31-32). They thought that there was no way out for Him, that He would be doomed whatever He said. They were in for a rude awakening.

The dilemma corresponds to that in the question regarding the tribute money, Matt. 22. 18.

⁵ This is the only record that we have of our Lord writing anything. He is the One about whom more books have been written than about any other person who has ever lived; cf. John 21. 25. Yet the only thing we know He wrote was written in the dust of the temple floor, which the wind or the feet of the crowd would soon erase.

⁶ This writing with the finger is associated with a woman not being condemned, in contrast with the writing with the finger which spelt condemnation for Belshazzar, Dan. 5. 5 with v. 27.

⁷ The law prescribed that the accuser or witness should be the first to cast a stone at the guilty party, Deut. 17. 7. This was no doubt intended to make men more cautious in bringing forward accusations, out of a sense of their responsibility, in being in the forefront of the executioners.

It has been said that ‘drama critics stone the cast first’!

⁸ He was calling them to apply the same standard of judgment to their own lives as they were seeking to apply to hers. . In essence He was saying, “Before you pick up that stone, take a good look in the mirror. Make sure you are morally qualified to put this woman to death. Make sure you are not guilty of the same kind of sin yourself”.

In order for them to have the right to cast a stone probably required that they be personally exempt from *any* sin which called for death by stoning.

⁹ Cf. ‘O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; 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 – and watch the link between ‘the fountain of living water’ with John 7. 37-39 and John 4. 10, 14. Was Jesus associating the scribes and Pharisees with those whom God condemns for forsaking Himself and whom He consigns to death?

¹⁰ It has been said, “If the inner thoughts of a man were written on his forehead, he would never take his hat off”.

¹¹ By saying, ‘neither do I’, the Lord Jesus gave the woman to understand that He (the sinless One) did have the right to take up the stones if He wished to.

¹² While He did not condemn her, He did condemn her sin. The one who followed Him ‘shall not walk in darkness’, John 8. 12; cf. 1 John 1. 6-7.

¹³ Was the woman married, or single and betrothed? Stoning is the biblically prescribed punishment for a betrothed virgin who is sexually unfaithful, a punishment to be meted out to both parties, Deut. 22. 23–24. Elsewhere death is prescribed for adulterers and adulteresses, Lev. 20. 10; Deut. 22. 22), but no method (such as stoning) is laid down. In the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 7. 4) the two cases are sharply differentiated; the offence in the first instance is punishable by stoning, and the second by strangling. That might suggest that the woman was betrothed, not married.

But see the following note by Godet ...

‘Stoning was ordained by Moses only for the case of an unfaithful betrothed virgin (Deut. xxii. 23, 24); for the adulterous wife, the kind of death was not determined (Lev. xx. 10). According to the Talmud, where the penalty is not specified, the law meant, not stoning, but strangling. And Meyer infers from this that this woman was an unfaithful betrothed virgin. This supposition is neither natural nor necessary. The declarations of the Talmud do

not form a law for the time of Jesus. Tholuck, Ewald and Keil (stoning ‘... was the usual punishment appointed in the law for cases in which death was inflicted’), as it seems to me, rightly hold, that where the law was silent, it was rather the punishment of stoning which was inflicted. This view is confirmed by vv. 2 and 27 of the chapter cited (Lev. xx.), where the penalty of death, not specified in ver. 10, is expressly designated as that by stoning. Comp. also Exod. xxxi. 4 and xxxv. 2, where the penalty of death is ordained for violators of the Sabbath, with Num. v. 32-34, where this punishment is inflicted, without any new determination having been given, under the form of stoning. (F Godet, volume 2, page 87.)

¹⁴ John 7. 2, 14, 37 – with Deut. 16. 16. According to the oral law of the Jews, it was unlawful to write even two letters on the Sabbath (Mishnah Shabbat 7. 2). But writing ‘in the dust’ was permissible (Mishnah Shabbat 12. 5: ‘[If] one writes with a liquid, or with fruit juice, or *in the dust* of the road, or scribes’ dust, or with any substance which does not endure, he is exempt’).

[See http://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Shabbat.7.2?lang=en&layout=lines&sidebarLang=all and http://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Shabbat.12.5?lang=en&layout=lines&sidebarLang=all]

Even if this were the eighth day of the feast, which was to be kept as a day of rest (Lev. 23. 36, 39), then Jesus’ writing *on the ground* was not an infringement of the oral Sabbath laws. (This presupposes that ‘the last day of the feast, the great day’, John 7. 37, was the seventh day and not the eighth; so Edersheim, ‘The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah’, Book 4, Chapter 7, but not Westcott.)

¹⁵ We should be asking, not ‘What did He write?’ (since it is idle to conjecture), but ‘Why did He write?’

¹⁶ The second time the text does not actually specify ‘with His finger’, but this is implicit – just as a reference to ‘the finger of God’ is implicit in the second account of God’s writing of the Ten Commandments, Exod. 32. 15-16; Deut. 10. 1-4.

¹⁷ As the Lord had earlier promised, Exod. 24. 12.

¹⁸ Exod. 31. 18.

¹⁹ Deut. 9. 15-16.

²⁰ Deut. 10. 1-2.

²¹ Exod. 32. 15-16. ‘...written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written’, Exod. 32. 15.

²² John 1. 17.

²³ For example, note 11 above.

²⁴ He’s prone to stoop. He stooped to wash feet, to embrace children, to pull Peter out of the sea, before the Roman whipping post, when carrying His cross.

²⁵ In the Decalogue God wrote the Ten Commandments twice and here Jesus writes twice. And also, both in the Decalogue and in John 8, the ‘finger’ is only specifically mentioned in the first instance (Exod. 31. 18 with Deut. 10. 4 and John 8. 6 with John 8. 8).

²⁶ Lev. 20. 10. He whom His opponents called ‘Teacher’ was the Author and Giver of the very Law to which they made their appeal.

²⁷ Cf. ‘For God did not send His Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but to save the world through Him’, John 3. 17. ‘Who has the right to forgive sins? If someone robbed you of your life’s savings or murdered your spouse, I would not have the right to forgive the perpetrator. On the human plane, the only one who can forgive is the injured party. From God’s perspective, of course, regardless of how many human beings are injured, the primary offense is against God himself (cf. Ps. 51:4). Thus God can forgive any sin, because he is always the injured party. On the human plane, the sinful woman in this narrative had not injured Jesus in any way. At that level, he did not have the right to forgive her. But the narrative turns on Jesus’ forgiveness of this woman (Luke 7:48)—and the other guests, a bit confused by this development, raise the question, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49). Who, indeed?’ (D A Carson on Luke 7. 36-50.)

²⁸ He didn’t give her a free pass to go and continue her life as it was. As is often said, ‘He loves us as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us as we are’. The order of our Lord’s words is also important. He didn’t say, “Sin no more and then I won’t condemn you”. That’s what religion says: “Clean up your act and then I will accept you”. Jesus says, “I will forgive you and give you the power to clean up your act”. Religion says, “Change or I will condemn you”. Grace says, “I have forgiven you. Now let me also change your life”; cf. Titus 2. 11-12. We don’t change in order to be accepted; we change because we have been accepted.

²⁹ John 1. 17.

³⁰ This assumes that Galatians was written around AD 48/49. See, for example, https://bible.org/article/date-and-destination-galatians#_ftnref109.

³¹ Gal. 3. 13.

³² Rom. 8. 1.