

Commentary on John 8: 1-11 Jerry Scott

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In analyzing these verses, I want first to go back to Old Testament laws.

First, the story of Moses and the Commandments.

Second, the New American Bible's translation of Leviticus 20:10, Deut 22:13-22.

Lev 20:10-22 "If a man commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. If a man disgraces his father by lying with his father's wife, both the man and his stepmother shall be put to death; they have forfeited their lives. If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; since they have committed an abhorrent deed, they have forfeited their life. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them shall be put to death for their abominable deed. If a man marries a woman and her mother also, the man and the two women as well shall be burned to death for their shameful behavior. If a man has carnal relations with an animal, the man shall be put to death and the animal shall be slain. If a woman goes up to any animal to mate with it, the woman and the animal shall be slain ... If a man consummates marriage with his sister or half sister, they shall be publically cut off from their people. If a man lies in sexual intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period, both of them shall be cut off from the people.... If a man marries his brother's wife and thus disgraces his brother, they shall be childless because of this incest...."

Deut 22:20-23 "if this charge is true and evidence of her virginity (that she claimed to be a virgin before marriage but was not) is not found, they shall bring the girl to the entrance of her father's house and there her townsmen shall stone her to death because she committed a crime against Israel by unchasteness in her father's house. Thus you shall purge evil from your midst. If a man is discovered having relations with a woman who is married to another, both the man and the woman with whom he had relations shall die. Thus you shall purge evil from your midst"

Third, the actual verses of John 8:1-11. I took these verses from the online Jerusalem Bible, which offers us a free download of any Chapters we need to use.

¹ and Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² At daybreak he appeared in the Temple again; and as all the people came to him, he sat down and began to teach them. ³ The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in the middle ⁴ they said to Jesus, 'Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, ⁵ and in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind. What have you got to say?' ⁶ They asked him this as a test, looking for an accusation to use against him. But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger. ⁷ As they persisted with their question, he straightened up and said, 'Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her.' ⁸ Then he bent down and continued writing on the ground. ⁹ When they heard this they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest, until the last one had gone and Jesus was left alone with the woman, who remained in the middle. ¹⁰ Jesus again straightened up and said, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' ¹¹ 'No one, sir,' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus. 'Go away, and from this moment sin no more.'

Fourth, my analysis of these powerful and impactful verses. **The greatest words ...**

I have often used this story. As a young man (with a lot of thanks to the quality academic education I received at McGill) I was always interested in words. As a college professor, my interest in words and their meanings and how some words told marvelous stories increased. Each month, I would learn new words that could convey a whole idea. In the context of today's gospel, I have wondered long and hard about what words Jesus wrote in that sand. Often I asked my college classes, "What were the most impactful words you have ever read or seen or heard?" I would usually suggest phrases like "I have a dream" or "Ask not what your country can do for you ..." or "Ich bin ein Berliner" and challenge the students to come up with words that impacted their lives. At the next class, I would tell them what I thought were the most impactful words every written.

In today's gospel, the supposed adulteress has already been convicted according to the laws of Moses. Of course, the Scribes and the Pharisees are the ones bringing the charges. Who are these two groups and what do they believe?

In the 2nd Century before Christ, many ardent Jews felt that the whole world was embracing Greek culture. A Jewish group, known as the Hasidim, arose to combat this influence and to preserve Jewish ways. The original Hasidim splintered into two groups, one going somewhat away from mainstream Judaism. The other group, **the Pharisees**, remained a faithful of regular Jewish life. They esteemed the "letter" of the Law of Moses and its oral traditions that they felt sprung from the law. As a result, they developed strict applications of the law for everyday life.

The **Biblical Scribes** have a notable history. All ancient peoples had large numbers of scribes for the transmission of religious texts and other legal and historical documents. Without skillful copyists and interpreters, there would have been no transmission of the biblical text. The scribes who did the work very quickly became authorities on the text. Many scribes were priests and Ezra is the most famous Scribe. Scribes were often linked to priestly groups. With professional Scribes, complicated holy writings just would not have made it through time. So, because of the work they did, scribes enjoyed the authority of leadership in Israel.

In literary terms, a **redaction** is a form of editing in which multiple source texts are combined and subjected to minor alteration to make them into a single work. The first five books of the Bible, often known as the **Pentateuch**, have been redacted from at least three different sources and ancient traditions. The **Mishnah** is the first major written redaction of the Jewish oral traditions. Sometimes, the Mishnah has been called the Oral Torah. In the Mishnah, the scribes are presented as pre-rabbinic teachers with authority, as well as copyists and teachers.

Now we have set up some historical background to help us understand the gospel story of the Adulteress in John 8: 1-11. Clearly, those committed to maintaining the Jewish religious traditions to the letter (the Pharisees) and those who thoroughly understood the written works and oral traditions (the Scribes) come to Jesus to try to trick him. And they had laid a very clever trap for Him to be sure. But, as we say in our modern language they had a "**fat chance**" of getting Him.

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Clearly, with their knowledge of religious traditions and written works, both the Scribes and Pharisees knew this woman to be guilty of Adultery. **“been caught in”** seems pretty obvious to me. **“Been caught in”** means that someone came into a bedroom where the two were having sex at that moment. All us fathers hope that our kids **“will never catch us.”** Other commentaries on this verse note that there already had been a trial and the only thing left to do was to stone her as the Law of Moses prescribed. So they thought they were going to test Jesus and his teaching of love for everyone. Our job is always to love our neighbor; it is God’s job to judge them; not ours.

This is where the words come in. At first (John 8:6) Jesus just bent down and scribbled something in the sand. I have often wondered what these scribbles were. But after this, **“they persisted in their questioning.”** Then Jesus straightened up and told them **“Let the man among you who has no sin cast the first stone at her.”** No stones were thrown at her.

The New Living Bible translates this verse as **“All right, stone her. Let those among you who have never sinned cast the first stone.”** The King James, the Jerusalem, and the New American do not render this verse this way. Jesus was in a trap here. If he told the accusers to stone her, he would be telling them to violate Roman law, as the Jews were not able to kill a person for a moral violation in Roman law. If he had done as the Living Bible says, the accusers would have rushed to Pilate demanding his death. But if he didn’t, he would have told them to obviate the Law of Moses and they would have had Him in disregard of Moses’ ancient Law.

Then Jesus bent down and again wrote the ground. John continues on with **“Then the audience drifted away one by one, beginning with the elders.”** Remember the elders were to cast the first stones. At this point, there was no one left. John continues **“Jesus finally straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where did they all disappear to? Has no one condemned you?’** ‘No one, sir,’ she answered. Jesus said, **‘Nor do I condemn you. You may go. But from now on, avoid this sin.’** “ So just what did Jesus write in the sand? Whatever He wrote, the words changed an angry, learned group which was fully empowered in their law and customs, and about to stone the woman to “cleanse evil from their midst.” The words were so powerful that they convicted all the men there, beginning with the elders, i.e., those in leadership positions.

If we were standing in that group today with stones in our hands, what words would Jesus have written down to cause us to put down our stones and walk away. We all have sins we have often repented of; none of us are saints. I am sure that if He came into our modern world of word processors and video screens, He could write something down to convict each and every one of us.

Jesus tells the woman, **“Nor do I condemn you!”** Hallelujah. Like that woman, He does not now condemn us for our sins. But He also does not let us off “Scott free” either, for he tells us today just as he did 2000 years ago, **“You may go. But from now on, avoid this sin.”** A similar message is given by Jesus in John 5:14, when He tells the paralytic he cured, **“Now you are well again, do not sin any more, or something worse may happen to you.”** Clearly, Jesus diffused a difficult situation here; to follow him, we should try diffusing similar situations in our own lives.

So when I think of this biblical scene, I always feel that whatever words Jesus wrote in that sand were the most powerful words ever written. Since I have loved words my whole life, on one hand, I would have loved to have been there, but since I know that he would have written down something that would have pierced my innermost being, I know I would have walked away like the Scribes and Pharisees and put down my stones and gone home and asked for forgiveness.