

JOHN 8

John 8:1–11. The Woman Taken in Adultery

This story does not appear in most early manuscripts, and some early commentators do not seem to be aware of it, leading most modern interpreters to the conclusion that it was not originally part of the Gospel of John. Even if this is the case, we should not dismiss its value. The early Christians who attached this passage to the Gospel clearly believed that it was a historical event that taught important lessons about Jesus.

The episode takes the form that several controversies in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) do: Jesus's opponents attempt to place Him in a dilemma in which any action or answer He gives is potentially problematic—a no-win situation. In each case, Jesus finds a way out, demonstrating His superhuman wisdom. In this particular situation, if Jesus were to give a negative answer (that the woman should not be held guilty), it would contradict the law, whereas an endorsement of the death penalty could have brought Jesus into conflict with Roman authority (see John 18:31).

Commentators have long been puzzled by Jesus writing on the ground. Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate, surmised that He wrote the sins of each man present on the ground. More likely, the action is an allusion to the tablets of the law, written by the “finger of God” (Deuteronomy 9:10). Just as Jesus once inscribed the law for Moses, now He stands as its supreme interpreter. Jesus's answer does not diminish the seriousness of the woman's sin but rather calls into question the motivations and truthfulness of her would-be accusers. Seeing that no legal action was brought against the woman, Jesus says to her, “Go, and sin no more.”

John 8:12–20. Light and Testimony

Although in Matthew Jesus tells His disciples, “Ye are the light of the world,” His statement here (“I am the light of the world”) does not have to be seen as contradictory. Biblical scholar and Catholic priest

Raymond Brown beautifully observes, “There is no contradiction here, for the disciples are the light of the world only inasmuch as they reflect Jesus.”¹ The themes of light and dark, so prominent in the Gospel of John, have background in the Old Testament but find even stronger parallels among contemporary writings such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. In these contemporary texts, as in John, they represent goodness and knowledge as opposed to evil and ignorance, respectively.

Although in verse 14 Jesus seems to contradict His previous statement in 5:31, both statements in fact appeal to the Father’s testimony to establish the truth. Citing Deuteronomy 19:15, Jesus claims that His testimony is legally valid and certified by the Father. The exchange in verse 19 indicates that Jesus’s audience still does not grasp the deeper meaning of His words; perhaps they expect Him to produce Joseph for legal testimony. After the three arrest attempts of the previous chapter, the Evangelist finds it noteworthy that “no man laid hands on him.”

John 8:21–29. Jesus’s Divine Origin

Once again, Jesus’s audience does not understand His words, but in a sense, their words ring true. As Jesus speaks of departing, He is indeed talking about His impending death, and in a sense, He will “kill himself,” laying down His life for the world. Jesus then states His divine origin more explicitly and explains that only through Him can sins be forgiven. Notice that in the King James Version, the translators have supplied “he” to the statement, “if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.” Jesus has simply said “I am” (Greek *egō eimi*), an echo of the divine name in Exodus 3:14. The implication is that unless we believe that Jesus is the divine Jehovah, we will remain in our sins. But His audience fails to understand this allusion, and their question in the following verse, “Who art thou?” is simply a reply to Jesus’s declaration: “You are . . . what?” Jesus’s almost exasperated response in verse 25 expresses some frustration with their chronic inability to understand.

He predicts that when the people have “lifted up the Son of man,” they will finally recognize His divine origins. In the Gospel of John, “lift up” (*hypsōō*) always refers to Jesus’s coming Crucifixion (and by implication, His Resurrection and Ascension into heaven—note also its use in 3 Nephi 27). We see this prediction hold true in the case of at least one individual. Nicodemus, who stole away to interview Jesus at night, was told that “the Son of man [must] be lifted up” (John 3:14). Though he did not come to full faith at first, when Nicodemus sees Jesus “lifted up” upon the cross, he finally recognizes his king and boldly brings a truly royal array of fragrance to embalm his slain Messiah (19:39).

John 8:30–36. Freedom from Sin

The crowd’s reaction is not entirely hostile—many begin to believe in Jesus upon hearing His words. But Jesus recognizes that such belief (or faith—there is no distinction in Greek) does not yet make them disciples.

Only endurance (Greek *meinō*, “to remain,” or here, “continue”) on this path will lead to discipleship and freedom from sin. The metaphor employed by Jesus in verse 32 was not uncommon in His day. Other writers, such as the Roman Seneca the Younger, spoke of vices as imprisonments and philosophy (here, “truth”) as a freeing power. Paul, too, will speak of sin and righteousness in such terms (Romans 6:16–18).

Given the tribulations of Israelite history, the audience’s response is surprising; perhaps, at least, they do not consider themselves in bondage now. But Jesus’s words are strong. The King James Version’s “servant” obscures the force of the Greek *doulos*, which more properly means “slave.” Jesus is offering His listeners not a lifetime in servitude to the forces of evil but a chance to become a member of the household of God. Truly, such an offer would make us “free indeed.”

John 8:37–47. Jesus’s Opponents

Jesus’s words in verse 37 respond to both parts of His listeners’ objection in verse 33—He acknowledges their Abrahamic descent but points out their current plot to destroy Him. They are then in the power of sin and thus in bondage. Verse 39 points out the contradiction of the current situation; although they are Abraham’s seed, Jesus’s opponents do not act as they should. Thus, Jesus insinuates that someone other than Abraham is their father, and His opponents do not take kindly to this suggestion. Their reply, “We be not born of fornication” is perhaps a veiled attack on Jesus (put the emphasis on “we”) since numerous early Christian writers report that a common line of attack against Christianity in their day was to accuse Jesus of being born illegitimately rather than divinely. At any rate, Jesus turns their words around; while they are true in a sense, they are even more true for Jesus. Jesus, too, has “one Father, even God,” and thus in is unique.

Jesus goes on to contrast His divine origin and truth speaking with the evil tendencies and lies of His opponents. It is not *despite* the fact that He tells the truth that they disbelieve but rather *because* He tells the truth. His opponents have pursued a path that has rendered them incapable of hearing the words of truth and recognizing them for what they are. We too must remain vigilant that we do not grow so desensitized to the whisperings of the Spirit that we are unable to hear and recognize God’s voice.

John 8:48–59. Jesus Is Greater than Abraham

Perhaps this accusation references Jesus’s warmth toward the hated Samaritans (see John 4:39–41), or it may just be an epithet of disdain (as is “thou . . . hast a devil”). Note that Jesus does not refute the implication that He is friendly toward the Samaritans, only the charge that He is demon-possessed. He defends his actions as honoring God.

Jesus’s final statement in verse 51 has a double meaning, typical of His remarks the Gospel of John. With our doctrinal hindsight, it is clear to us that He is speaking of spiritual death, but His listeners

understand only physical death and take offense at the absurdity of such a claim. Their question in verse 53 anticipates a negative answer—no, of course this Jesus is not greater than Abraham. But the irony in such confidence is palpable; they are in fact talking to One greater than Abraham. The same sense of incredulity pervades their question in verse 57.

Jesus’s response meets His opponents’ incredulity head-on. Rather than backing down, He makes an even bolder claim—His preexistence affords Him seniority over Abraham. There is also a distinction in the verbs used for Abraham and Jesus. Abraham “was” (Greek *gignomai*), whereas Jesus “exists” (Greek *eimi*). As in the prologue of John (1:1–18), things created by Jesus exist using one verb of existence (*gignomai*), whereas the self-existent Word is described with an entirely different verb (*eimi*). And as in other places, the declaration “I am” echoes the divine name given in Exodus 3:14. His audience clearly recognizes this, and following the injunction of Leviticus 24:16, they attempt to stone Jesus. Since the temple was still under construction, stones would have been plentiful, but Jesus once again escapes the attempt. His appointed hour, while approaching, has not yet arrived.

Notes

- 1 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 340.

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