

John 7:53-8:30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] John chapter 7 verse 53 to chapter 8 verse 30 They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst, they said to him, Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.

Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say? This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her. And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. And when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones. And Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

[1 : 08] Jesus stood up and said to her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, No one, Lord. And Jesus said, Neither do I condemn you.

Go, and from now on, sin no more. Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

So the Pharisees said to him, You are bearing witness about yourself. Your testimony is not true.

Jesus answered, Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true.

For I know where I came from and where I am going. But you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge according to the flesh. I judge no one.

Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true. For it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two people is true.

[2 : 06] I am the one who bears witness about myself. And the Father who sent me bears witness about me. They said to him, Therefore, Where is your father? Jesus answered, You know neither me nor my father.

If you knew me, you would know my father also. These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple. But no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

So he said to them again, I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin.

Where I am going, you cannot come. So the Jews said, Will he kill himself, since he says, Where I am going, you cannot come?

He said to them, You are from below. I am from above. You are of this world. I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins.

For unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins. So they said to him, Who are you?

Jesus said to them, Just what I have been telling you from the beginning.

[3 : 08] I have much more to say about you, and much to judge. But he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him. They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father.

So Jesus said to them, When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.

And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him. As he was saying these things, many believed in him. John chapter 7 verses 53 to 8 verse 11 is not present in many of the earliest manuscripts, and so the question arises of what we are supposed to do with this.

While some might argue that there are Johannine themes, it might fit more neatly with the themes and style of Luke's Gospel or one of the other synoptics. Although it is not present in many of the earliest versions, however, this passage has been received by the Church from fairly early on, and it seems to be an authentic tradition.

I am inclined to treat it as a sort of orphan that has, through God's providence, been taken into the house of John's text. It wasn't written by John, but it belongs in the Scripture.

[4 : 28] I am not going to make any decisive theological argument on its basis, though, and although we can doubt the source from which it comes when we speak of it, I think it's worth discussing.

The scribes and the Pharisees here seem to be trying to trap Jesus in his words, either getting him to claim an authority that would go against the rule of the Romans, or to compromise the law of Moses.

The scribes are only mentioned here in the book of John, and the movement between the Temple and the Mount of Olives is only mentioned here in John, so once again we're seeing elements within this account that would seem to mark it out from its surroundings.

The attempts of the scribes and the Pharisees to trap Jesus in his words, and Jesus' shrewd response, is also similar to what we can see in the final chapters of some of the synoptics.

My suspicion, then, is that this records an authentic tradition concerning Jesus, but wasn't written by John. Jesus' point in challenging the scribes and the Pharisees is not that the death penalty is wrong per se, which is how many people have read this passage, but that the death penalty could only be unjustly exercised under those circumstances.

[5 : 43] Every one of the witnesses that come forward is somehow compromised, whether if we see some sort of conspiracy of entrapment, we could ask where is the man if she's been caught red-handed, or through their own guilt of the same sin.

Within the Old Testament, the person who cast a stone was casting, making a self-maledictory oath that if they were guilty in some sense, the same judgment would come back upon them.

Within Luke chapter 16, verses 14 to 18, Jesus challenges the scribes and the Pharisees for their sexual license, and maybe that is part of the background here. Jesus focuses attention upon the first stone.

Now, why the first stone? As René Girard has observed, it's the first stone that sets the pattern for all of the others. Each successive stone is easier to throw.

The other thing is that the first stone was to be cast by witnesses. In Deuteronomy chapter 17, verse 7, we see this. The witnesses were subject to the same penalty themselves if they sinned in their act of judgment.

[6 : 50] No one could cast the first stone without taking that responsibility upon themselves. And if no one could cast the first stone, then no execution could occur.

And where there were no witnesses in a case of adultery, a different judgment applied, which is the test of jealousy that we see in Numbers chapter 5. What Jesus seems to be doing here is showing that all of the supposed witnesses are disqualified.

They're not in a position to judge. And so gradually they remove themselves from the scene and the remaining form of judgment is the test of jealousy. Now, this might explain why Jesus is writing on the ground.

When the scribes and the Pharisees bring forward the woman, Jesus pretends not to hear them and he stoops down and he writes on the ground. And he's already putting the appropriate law for the woman's case into effect.

When the scribes and the Pharisees are insistent, he shows them that they are disqualified as witnesses according to the adultery law. But his legal response, his own response, is ongoing.

[7 : 57] So he's spending a considerable amount of time writing. Enough time for the scribes and the Pharisees to ask him to respond several times to his question. And enough for all the accusers gradually to leave one by one.

And even seemingly for some time after they've all departed. And I don't think that this writing is incidental to the narrative. But it's important for what's taking place. The significance of the writing becomes clearer in the context of the Numbers 5 ritual of jealousy.

It's the only right of its kind to involve lengthy writing as part of its process. So the events take place in the temple just as the ritual of jealousy took place in the tabernacle before the presence of God.

The ritual of jealousy involved dust from the ground of the tabernacle floor, a process of writing, and holy water. And the effect was to reveal secret sin through the deliverance of divine judgment, typically involving some curse or condemnation coming upon the guilty party.

And in the story of the woman caught in adultery, we see these elements. Jesus performs the writing ritual with his finger on the dust of the ground of the temple. And we're playing out this pattern.

[9 : 08] The judgment is taking place and the woman's about to be tested. The test of jealousy essentially involves God judging in cases where there are no fit human witnesses, no human witness in a position to understand what has gone on.

Jesus enacts the ritual of jealousy. And at the climax of the ritual of jealousy, God judges in the case of the woman who's accused of adultery. But here it's Jesus who judges.

He claims the prerogative of God in judgment, in which all human judgment is put to one side and God alone declares and enacts the sentence. This, I believe, is an important witness to Christ's identity.

Jesus brings hidden sins to light and he brings judgment upon the situation. He's not merely playing the role of the priest in this ritual then, but the role of God himself.

And his judgment concerning the woman is a judgment characterized by grace, a judgment that calls her not to sin anymore, but lets her go free. The conversation that follows returns to many of the themes that we've seen in the chapter that precedes.

[10 : 15] The themes of origins, of witness, of bearing true or false witness. And here, Jesus is raising tensions with the Jews as he responds to their questions and challenges them and shows that they are speaking falsehood.

His origins are from above, theirs are from below. Where he is going, they cannot come. And that statement is taken by them to refer to a possible attempt at suicide.

And there is an irony there because it will be precisely through Jesus' death and his willing going to the cross that he will forge this way that they cannot come on. Jesus' identity continues to be cryptic at this point.

And yet, he makes this statement that is a startling one. When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak just as the Father taught me.

The statement, I am he, is one that might be suggesting a claim at divinity. Something that we see later on in this chapter, seemingly confirming that this is in view at this point.

[11 : 27] God's name is I am and Jesus presents himself as the I am who has come to visit his people. The closeness of the relationship between Jesus and the Father is emphasized throughout this passage.

If you knew me, you would know my Father also. And then later on, that he speaks just as the Father taught him. As a final question to reflect upon, think about the ways in which Christ identifies himself with and connects himself with the Father within this and other chapters within the Gospel of John.

How are we seeing an early Trinitarian theology starting to take shape at this point?