

Woman Caught In Adultery

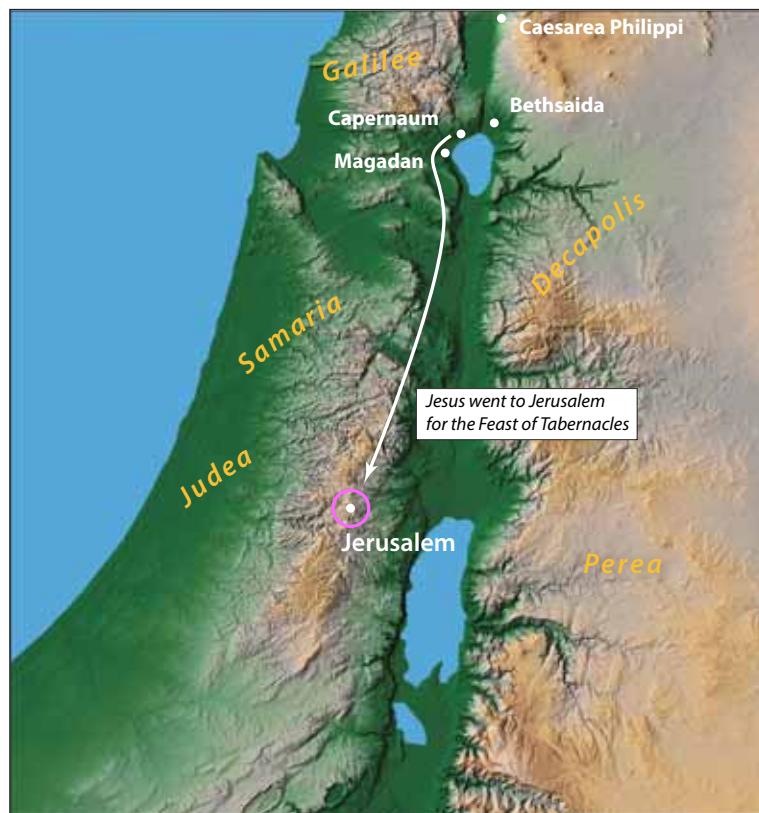
This study is about a woman caught in adultery. Apparently someone entered a room while she and her lover were engaged in sexual activity. That would have been extremely embarrassing to be caught in a sexual act. It would also have been a very fearful experience since the Mosaic Law required that the woman and her lover be killed (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). One wonders why the story does not mention anything about the man who was also engaged in the sexual activity. On the surface it appears that the woman was singled out by the religious leaders. Maybe it was a trap designed to see if Jesus would condemn only the woman. We know nothing about her husband or her lover. The story has been appealed to by many as a wonderful act of forgiveness and even tolerance by others. We are not told what Jesus wrote on the ground or why the religious leaders left, starting with the older men and finally the younger men. The message of the story is simple. Jesus never condemned her and only warned her to not do it again. Consequently some teach that we should be more tolerant.

DOUBTS ABOUT THE STORY. Unfortunately there are serious doubts that the events in this story actually occurred. These doubts exist because the John 7:53 through John 8:11 does not exist in the earliest and most reliable ancient manuscripts. Some very old ancient manuscripts contain white space between John 7:52 and John 8:12 which would indicate that the copyist left out this story.¹ The early Greek church fathers do not refer to it. In some manuscripts the passage appears in other locations in John and even the book of Luke. The passage appears to have been inserted by some copyists. D.A. Carson offers a lengthy discussion about the manuscript evidence for John 7:53-8:11 and as to whether this story belongs in the gospel of John. He writes,

These verses are present in most of the medieval Greek minis-

cule manuscripts, but they are absent from virtually all early Greek manuscripts that have come down to us, representing great diversity of textual traditions. The most notable exception is the Western unical D, known for its independence in numerous other places. They are also missing from the earliest forms of the Syriac, and Coptic Gospels and from many Old Latin, Old Gregorian and Armenian manuscripts. All the early church fathers omit this narrative: in commenting on John, they pass immediately from 7:52 to 8:12. No Eastern Father cites the passage before the tenth century. . . Moreover, a number of (later) manuscripts that include the narrative mark it off with asterisks or obeli, indicating hesitation as to its authenticity, while those that do include it display a rather high frequency of textual variants. Although most of the manuscripts that

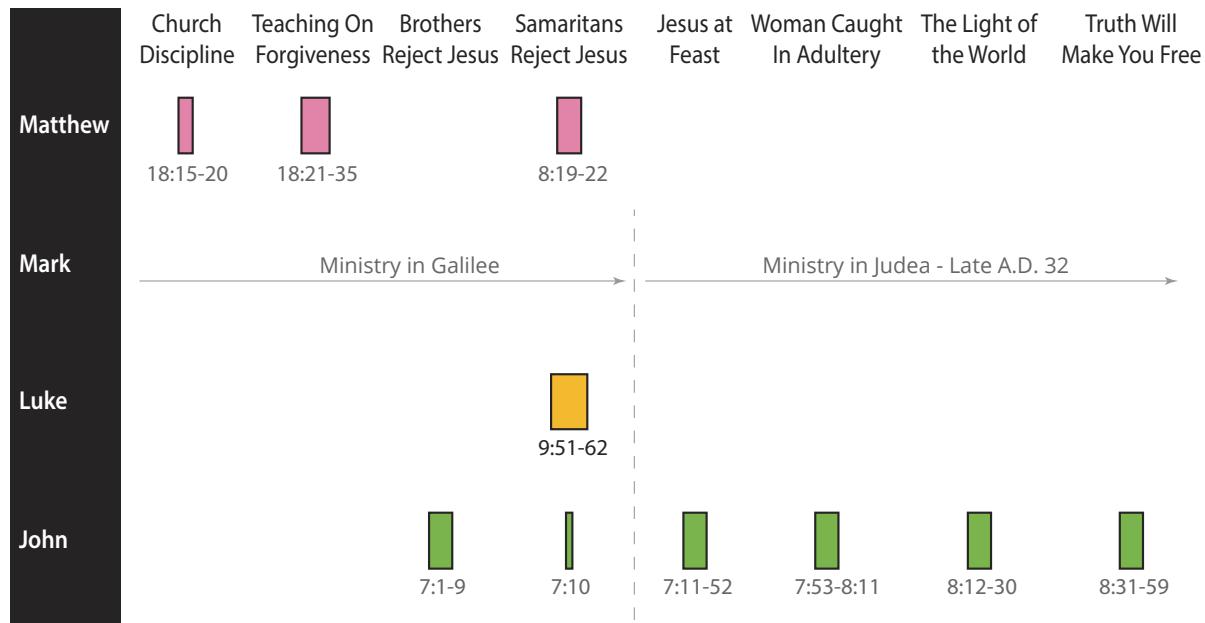
include the story place it here (i.e. at 7:53-8:11), some place it after John 7:44, John 7:36 or John 21:25. The diversity of placement



1. H. A. Ironside. John. Kregel Academic & Professional. 1920. p. 193.

Life and Heart of Jesus

Ministry In Galilee - Late A.D. 32



confirms the inauthenticity of the verses . . .²

John MacArthur writes,

The story was most likely history, a piece of oral tradition that circulated in parts of the Western church. (Most of the limited early support for its authenticity comes from Western manuscripts and versions, and from Western church fathers such as Jerome, Ambrose , and Augustine.) Eventually, it was written down and found its way into later manuscripts.³

It is possible that the story is based on oral tradition. If so, then there may be some truth to the account. Consequently, most Bibles include the story in order to avoid the error of deleting it. Notable Bible teachers such as R. C. H. Lenski, G. Campbell Morgan, Kent Hughes, F. F. Bruce and Leon Morris do not include it their commentaries. But Hendrick-

sen, John MacArthur, Albert Barnes, Matthew Henry, John Calvin, H. A. Ironside and Arthur Pink include the event.

THE EARLY MORNING. John 7:53 and John 8:2 tell us that everyone went home after the conversation between Nicodemus and the other Pharisees. That implies the events in the later part of John 7 occurred in the late afternoon or the early evening. John 7:37 says that it was the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles and John 7:53 says that they went home. That is what one would expect at the end of the feast and John 8:2 confirms that the day had ended when it says “early in the morning.” Now we know the events of John 8:1-11 occurred in the early morning hours. John 8:1 tells us that after everyone went home, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. We do not know why He went to the Mount of Olives. Luke 21:37-38 says that apparently Jesus regularly taught during the day and then went to the mountain at night. Maybe He went there to pray. John 8:2 suggests that Jesus remained on the mountain all night because the next thing that we are told is that early in the morning He returned to the temple.

2. D.A. Carson. The Gospel According To John. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991., p. 333.

3. John MacArthur. John 1-11. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Moody Publishers. 2006. p. 323-324.

Everyone went to his home. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. John 7:53-8:2 (NASB)

The Greek word that is translated as “early morning” is *opthpos* and it means that as the sun was just breaking over the horizon or day-break Jesus came to the temple. One can imagine Him walking by Himself towards the temple and then maybe one or two people seeing Him. We are told that He came to the temple *again*. The prophet Malachi prophesied that the Messiah would come to the temple.

Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple . . .” says the LORD of hosts. Mal. 3:1 (NASB)

The verse quotes our God who claims that His messenger, who is John the Baptist, would prepare the way. He says, “. . . before Me.” And who is the “Me” who would come to the temple? The answer is God Himself. This is a powerful statement that says the one who would come to the temple would be God Himself. The gospel of Luke tells us that the first time Jesus Christ came to the temple was for His circumcision and dedication (Luke 2:21-38). He returned once again as a child when His family went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover (Luke 2:41-48). Then John 2:14-15 tells us that at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, He came to the temple. Throughout His ministry He visited the temple repeatedly (Mark 14:49). John 8:2 gives us one of those occasions. Luke 21:38 indicates that Jesus visited the temple one last time, just before His arrest and crucifixion at the end of His ministry. These were more signs that Jesus was and is the Messiah.

John 8:2 states that after Jesus arrived at the temple a crowd came to Him. This reveals that the people could recognize His face. He was extremely well-known and so popular that they rushed to tell others that He was at the temple. Recently, my wife and I were flying to Washington D.C. for a pastor’s conference. We were at an airport and

we saw a man who appears frequently on a news network. I commented to my wife that I had just seen him, but I did not rush to tell anyone else. I did not shout to others that he was right there. As a result there weren’t any crowds. But when Jesus appeared, He was so popular and the people were so excited to see Him that they told other people. The news spread and a crowd grew. Mark 1:27 has already told us that the people were amazed at His teaching and authority. He was the most incredible speaker that anyone had ever heard.

ADULTEROUS WOMAN. Next we are told that Jesus sat down and started teaching. That was the custom among the religious leaders in Jesus day. Luke 4:16-21 illustrates this truth. The passage reveals that Jesus entered a Nazarene synagogue and was offered the opportunity to speak. He was given the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and read Isaiah 62:1-2. It was customary to stand while the Word of God was read. After He finished reading He sat down and started teaching (v. 21). Jesus sat down to teach on other occasions (Luke 5:1-3). Some pastors sit even today in order to teach because they desire to follow Christ’s example, but scripture never teaches that one must sit to teach the scriptures.

Verse 3 reveals that the religious leaders also came. But they came with wrong motives. They did not come to learn. They came with the goal of discrediting our Lord Jesus Christ.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act.” John 8:3-4 (NASB)

They brought a woman who had been caught in the very act of committing adultery. One wonders how this happened. Did someone just happen to find the couple having sexual relations - in the very act? Did someone or the religious leaders intentionally open the door to discover the couple? It would be difficult to find a couple in the “very act” since most couples have sexual relations in private. Had the religious leaders been suspicious of a woman and then tried to catch her in the “very act”? Did they suspect that this would

happen and hoped it would occur so they could trap Jesus? One wonders why the man was not brought to Jesus along with the woman. Why only the woman? Did they think that Jesus might be more inclined to condemn her since the religious leaders of Jesus' day had a lower view of women?

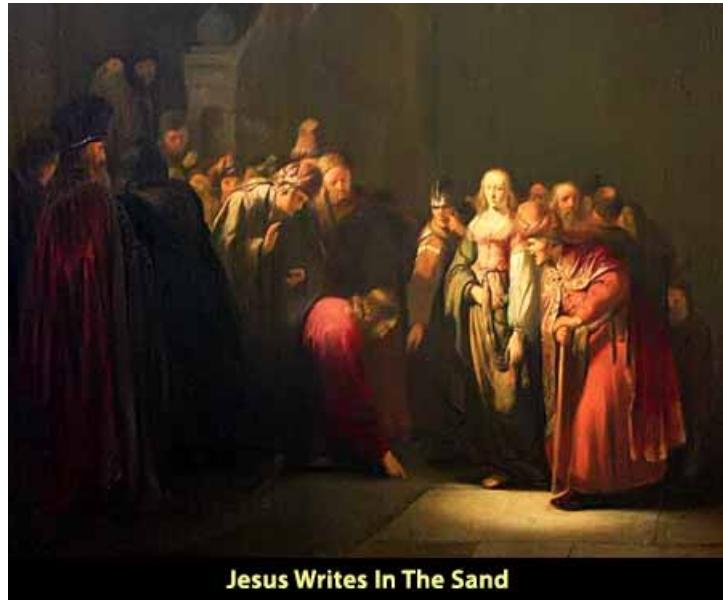
We are told that they put her in the center of the court of the temple and then described what she had done. Then they added,

Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say? John 8:5 (NASB)

They told the truth. Both Exodus 20:14 and Deut. 5:18 prohibited adultery and Lev. 20:10 and Deut. 22:22-24 described the consequences,

If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. Lev. 20:10 (NASB)

If a man is found lying with a married woman, then both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel. If there is a girl who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death; the girl, because she did not cry out in the city, and the man, because he has violated his neighbor's wife. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. Deut. 22:22-24 (NASB)



Jesus Writes In The Sand

Both passages teach that both the man and woman were to be killed. Then why did the Pharisees only bring the woman? This reveals something about the trap they created for Jesus. The next verse reveals that they tried to trap Jesus in order

to accuse Him.

They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him . . . John 8:6a (NASB)

But of what did they want to accuse Him? First, if Jesus said that the woman should be released, the Pharisees would have accused Jesus of violating the Mosaic Law and discredit Him before the people. His claim to be the Messiah would have been in question.

Second, if Jesus had said, "Stone her to death," they would have accused Him of lacking compassion. So far in Jesus' ministry the Pharisees had been witnesses to His compassion for the people. Luke 7:34; 15:2; and 19:7 record that the religious leaders were critical

of His compassion. It may be that Jesus' very compassion was the motivation for bringing the woman. They wanted to discredit Jesus; would He violate the Law?

Third, if Jesus had refused to take a position, He would have been criticized. By bringing just the woman they placed an emphasis on compassion - compassion for the woman. Throughout Jesus' ministry

He healed the people, fed the people and taught the people. He had shown great compassion for the people while also claiming to uphold the Mosaic Law (Matt. 5:17). The religious leaders had planned this one well. The trap was set. What would Jesus do?

WRITING IN THE DIRT. Then Jesus leaned over and wrote on the ground.

... But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. John 8:6b (NASB)

The Greek word that is translated as "wrote" is in the imper-

fect tense. The imperfect refers to repeated continuous action. This reveals that Jesus apparently wrote a number of times. What did He write? There are many opinions about what Jesus wrote. Some believe Jesus wrote the names and sins of the different religious leaders in the dirt or He wrote a word of warning aimed at the religious leaders.⁴ H. A. Ironside believes that what Jesus wrote on the ground was Jeremiah 17:13.⁵

O LORD, the hope of Israel,
All who forsake You will be put to shame.
Those who turn away on earth will be written down,
Because they have forsaken the fountain of living water,
even the LORD.

The verse implies that all who forsake the Lord will be written in the dirt. If that is what Jesus wrote, then verse 7 would imply that He wrote their names in the dirt. They were all guilty - of sexual sin. T. W. Manson suggested that Jesus followed a custom of Roman magistrates who wrote their sentence and then read it.⁶ John MacArthur writes,

Others suggest that He wrote the words He would say in verse 7, or part of the Law (such as the prohibition against bringing a malicious witness in Ex. 23:10).⁷

But the truth is no one knows what Jesus wrote since the scriptures do not tell us. B. F. Wescott has the best conclusion,

It is quite vain to conjecture what was written, if indeed we are to understand anything more than the mere mechanical actions of writing.⁸

It is obvious that the Holy Spirit did not think it was impor-

4. William Hendriksen. John. Baker Book House. 1953. p. 37.

5. H. A. Ironside. John. Kregel Academic & Professional. 2006. p. 196.

6. W. T. Manson. (as cited by D.A. Carson. The Gospel According To John. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1991. p.335.)

7. John MacArthur. John 1-11. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Moody Publishers. 2006. p. 328.

8. B. F. Wescott. The Gospel According To St. John. Eerdmans Publishing co. 1975. p. 126.

tant for us to know anything more, but only the simple statement that Jesus wrote.

THROW A STONE. Whatever Jesus wrote, it did not stop them.

But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” John 8:7

The Greek word for the verb “persisted” is *epimeno*. It is in the imperfect tense and is a participle which means that they were continuing to ask Him what should be done to the woman. They did not ask just once but continued asking. They wanted an answer now. They did not want to wait for Him to finish writing on the ground. They were asking while He had leaned over to write on the ground. Jesus did not answer them until He stood up. Then He challenged them about their own sin. “He who is without sin among you” were His first words. Jesus and the religious leaders obviously knew that everyone who has been born has sinned (Ps. 51:5). Therefore, was Jesus referring to a specific type of sin? Is it possible that every man standing there was guilty of sexual sin or adultery? Again, we do not know.

**Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. John 8:8
(NASB)**

Then He leaned over again and wrote on the ground. I would love to know what He wrote, but once again the Holy Spirit did not think it was important enough to tell us.

When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. John 8:9 (NASB)

Verse 9 tells us that the Pharisees heard Jesus’ words in verse 7, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” and verse 8 tells us that they saw what He wrote. They both heard and saw. A number of Greek manuscripts add “being convicted by their conscience.”⁹

9. Reuben Swanson. John. New Testament Greek manuscripts. Sheffield Academic Press. 1995. p. 108.

Even though the better manuscripts do not contain this phrase, it is obvious that their conscience convicted them because they left one by one and Jesus was left alone with the woman. They were convicted by a combination of written and spoken words. They were so embarrassed that they could not stay.

They did not realize that they were dealing with the God of the universe who knew everything that they had done. This reminds us of the Galilean woman at the well in John 4. After Jesus had revealed that He knew about her five husbands (John 4:17-19), she said, "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?" (John 4:29). On other occasions we are told that Jesus had supernatural knowledge (Matthew 12:25; Luke 6:8; John 1:48; 16:30; 21:17). One wonders what He revealed - that He knew perhaps something that they had all done together?

Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" John 8:10 (NASB)

COMPASSION OF CHRIST. Then Jesus stood up and asked the obvious, "Where are they? Where are those who wanted you to be condemned?"

She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more." John 8:11 (NASB)

The woman answered Jesus with, "No one, Lord." Then He

said, "now sin no more." Why did Jesus not condemn her? Did He just ignore her sin? It is obvious that He did not ignore her sin since He told her to "sin no more." Most likely the woman was begging God for forgiveness and mercy as she was being taken by the religious leaders to Jesus. I imagine the woman was greatly embarrassed and fearful as she was forced to walk through the streets. By the time she was brought to Jesus, she was in great fear of being stoned to death. Most likely, just like most of us, she was begging God for forgiveness. She did not need to be told to confess her sins. What she needed was to know that she was forgiven. The unexpected rebuke was "Go. Sin no more." I am sure that she did not commit that sin again.

Oh, that we would flee sin without being rebuked. But that is not our usual nature. We wait until we see the consequences or the threat of a danger and then we stop sinning. This woman waited until she was caught in the sexual act. Maybe her accusers had gazed upon her naked body and then piously rebuked her before hauling her to Jesus. Then they announced her sin for everyone on the temple grounds to hear her guilt. What incredible embarrassment and anguish she must have suffered.

I am sure that she repented fervently and to God. What she needed was compassion and He gave it to her. The Holy Spirit wrote these words for us,

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 (NASB)