
The Woman Caught in Adultery: A Test of Jesus as the Greater Prophet

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Introduction

The story of the woman caught in adultery, recorded in John 7:53–8:11, and especially Jesus' words, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (8:7), have been used in various ways: to justify lenience in criminal cases, to oppose capital punishment, to argue against church discipline, and to relax moral standards. While all would agree that no story in the Bible can be fully understood apart from its contextual setting, this one is rarely taught with an understanding of the surrounding context. Those who advocate the applications mentioned above seldom attempt to understand the story in the light of its context.

In fact problems with the interpretation of this passage have been present from its beginning. Its omission from early Greek manuscripts may have been based on the impression that Christ was too easy on adultery. Some have thought that some church fathers did not refer to it since they were fearful of encouraging the committing of the crime.¹

THE TEXTUAL PROBLEM

One reason this story is not studied in its context is the question of whether it was part of the original manuscript of the Gospel of

¹ S. T. Bloomfield, *The Greek Testament*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1839), 1:440.

John. This writer believes it is the Word of God, and is an inseparable part of the context of John 7-8. The textual evidence has been treated by many scholars and will not be repeated here.² However, when a passage fits so well into the surrounding context as does this one, considerable weight must be given to its inclusion in the text.

THE PROBLEM OF THE MESSAGE

If Jesus argued that one needed to be perfect to judge anyone guilty of a crime, then He overruled what Moses had said, and He was not the Prophet about whom Moses spoke (Deut. 18:15). The purpose of the Pharisees was to show that Jesus *would* contradict Moses. If Jesus said that one could not enforce Moses' command concerning adultery, then He did exactly as the Pharisees had expected. Why then did they leave and not protest the contradiction? Moses had never stated that a man needed to be perfect to judge adultery or murder or any other crime. In fact God had commanded that adultery be prosecuted (Deut. 22:23-24). Obviously Old Covenant people had personal sin, yet performed acts of civil justice.

Christ came to offer grace and truth (John 1:17), while Moses had given the Law. But the two were not contradictory. They worked together—the Law condemned, but through grace and truth Jesus offered a way out of the condemnation (1:29; 3:17).

THE GREATER MOSES MUST AFFIRM MOSES

This article seeks to show that the *Pericope Adulterae* brought to a pinnacle John's presentation of Christ as the Prophet of whom Moses had spoken (Deut. 18:15). Further it will seek to show that Christ not only obeyed the Mosaic Law, as those present understood it, but also enforced it completely. The pericope demonstrates that Jesus was "the Prophet," the true Teacher of the Law, while the scribes and Pharisees used it to attempt to disprove His claim.

The first seven chapters of the Gospel of John contrast Jesus, the "Greater Prophet" of the New Covenant, with Moses, the prophet of the Old Covenant. This contradistinction culminates in the test of the woman caught in adultery in chapter 8.

"The Prophet" in the Gospel of John

THE PROLOGUE TO JOHN'S GOSPEL

A prophet was always a revealer of God's Word. John pointed out that Jesus is "the Word," the ultimate revelation (light) from

² For a discussion of the textual evidence, see Alan Frank Johnson, "A Re-examination of the Pericope Adulterae, John 7:53-8:11" (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1964), 31-284.

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God (1:1-13), who became flesh and revealed the Father to man (vv. 14-18).³ Jesus was contrasted to Moses, through whom the condemning Law was given (v. 17). Man stood condemned through the Law of Moses (5:45), but Jesus provided the grace for forgiveness. This came not through the symbolic lamb of Moses' Passover but through the true Passover Lamb of God.

In John's prologue Jesus introduced a new stage in the development of revelation and redemptive history. Grace was brought in to relieve man of his condemnation under the Law. This contrast is carried out in the remainder of the Gospel. Jesus, being the superior Prophet of whom Moses spoke (Deut. 18:15), was the ultimate reality of God's revelation (light) and grace to men. Those who recognized and accepted the truth lived in the light. Those who hated that truth lived in the darkness (John 3:19).

THE THEME OF GRACE AND TRUTH

The noncondemnation theme, which was introduced by the contrast of Moses and the Law to Christ and grace and truth (John 1:17) is continued in John 3. Jesus pointed out to Nicodemus that God had sent His Son into the world to give eternal life (3:16). He stated that He did not come to condemn the world (v. 17), for the world stood already condemned by the Law of Moses. Christ had come to save the world from that condemnation. Those who did not accept the revelation of grace that He brought were judged by the fact that they refused that light.

THE GREATER PROPHET

The theme of the greater Prophet runs throughout the Gospel of John,⁴ especially the first eight chapters. Jesus is presented, not as contradicting Moses, but as bringing grace to those condemned by the Law. He did this through His function as Messiah, the ultimate Passover Lamb of God. Was John the Baptist the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet (1:21)? John the Baptist denied all those titles and pointed to Jesus as the ultimate One. Throughout the book evidences are presented that Jesus is all three: the Messiah (the major theme, 20:31), the greater Elijah (6:1-14),⁵ and the Prophet (5:46).

³ According to Deuteronomy 18:18 the greater Moses was identified by the fact that He would speak exactly the words God the Father told Him.

⁴ Many have recognized the Mosaic theme throughout the Gospel. Among these is Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, Supplements to *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 14 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967).

⁵ Moses and Elijah did many parallel deeds. Though Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 is parallel to the feeding of the people in the wilderness in Moses' day, it also parallels the feeding of 100 by Elisha (2 Kings 4:42-44). This suggests that Moses and Eli-

Evidences of the Prophet. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus turned water into joyful wine in the waterpots of stone (2:1-11), whereas Moses had turned water into blood of judgment in the vessels of stone in Egypt during the plagues (Exod. 7:19).⁶

At Jacob's well a Samaritan woman questioned whether Jesus was greater than Jacob (John 4:12), perceived Him as a prophet (4:19), and concluded that He is the Messiah (4:25-29).

In chapter 5 the question of Jesus' identity came to a crest when He healed a man on the Sabbath. The Jews took this as a contradiction to Moses (5:16, 18). But after they accused Christ, He turned the accusation on them, pronouncing that *they* were the ones who opposed Moses (5:45). In fact not only did He agree with Moses, but also He announced (5:46) that He was the Prophet of whom Moses wrote.

Then Jesus promptly set out to demonstrate that position. He showed He was greater than Moses by performing two signs (6:1-21).⁷ Moses had given them manna in the wilderness and had parted the Red Sea. Christ provided food for 5,000 men out of virtually nothing.⁸ And whereas Moses needed a dry surface on which to cross the Red Sea, Jesus simply walked on the waves.⁹ Christ pointed out that while Moses' manna did not prevent their ancestors from dying (6:49), He as the greater Prophet offered the living bread. The one who partook of this bread would never die (6:50-51).

The Prophet and the Feast of Tabernacles. John 7 deals with Jesus' messiahship, for while the Feast of Tabernacles commemorated the wilderness protection under Moses' leadership (Lev. 23:43), it would find its fulfillment in the messianic kingdom (Zech. 14:16). However, the theme of the Prophet is continued as the Jews debated with Him over the fact that He had seemingly opposed Moses, for

jah/Elisha were Israel's greatest prophets. The greater Prophet must be greater than they were (John 6:14). Christ's walking on the sea, similar to Moses' parting of the Red Sea, was also parallel to Elijah's and Elisha's parting the waters of the Jordan (2 Kings 2:8, 14). Further references on the Moses/Elijah/Christ parallel may be found in Ronald Barclay Allen, "Elijah, the Broken Prophet," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (September 1979): 201-2, and in this author's "The Elijah/Elisha Motif in Luke 7-10" (ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985).

⁶ Alvin L. Thompson, "Jesus as the New Moses in the Gospel of John" (Paper for Bible 380, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 1987), p. 9.

⁷ It is significant to note the setting of this chapter. Jesus ascended the mountain as Moses did when he received the Law. It was near the time of the celebration of Passover, the day when Israel had been freed through the leadership of Moses.

⁸ This Moses comparison is confirmed by the reaction of the people to this miracle as they said, "This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14).

⁹ There is a literary comparison here in the setting in Exodus 14:21 and John 6:18. In both cases a strong wind was blowing at night. In Moses' case it dried up the sea so that he might walk on the dry land. Jesus simply walked on the blowing waves.

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they were still debating over the ethics of healing a crippled man on the Sabbath (John 7:14-24). Jesus accused the Jews of judging not with righteous judgment but according to appearance, and thus they, not He, opposed the writings of Moses.

On the last day of the Feast, some of the people were saying, "This certainly is the Prophet" (7:40). Jesus' words that made them think He was the Prophet had just been spoken, "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water'" (7:38). Jesus was apparently using the wilderness experience of Moses as a background for His comments (Exod. 17:6; Num. 20:11).¹⁰ The Messiah's pouring out of the Spirit is seen as superior to Moses' pouring out of water in the wilderness.¹¹ Recognizing Jesus' claim, the people concluded that He is the Prophet.

The Pharisees opposed the people's conclusion that He is the Prophet. However, Nicodemus urged them to judge according to properly administered Law (John 7:51). Yet they still argued, "Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee" (v. 52).¹²

Summary. Thus the scene was set. Christ had presented Himself as the Prophet. He had demonstrated it by providing living bread and walking on the sea. On the Sabbath His grace liberated a man from being crippled. The Pharisees held this was a contradiction to Moses. Christ accused them of judging by appearances and not righteously, stating that they were not of Moses, for Moses spoke of Him. He claimed to be a fulfillment of prophecy by providing not water like Moses but the abundance of the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus told the Pharisees to judge Him as the Prophet on the proper basis of the Law, but they told him that Jesus could not be a prophet.

The Pharisees were at a crucial point. Since the people were concluding that Jesus is the Prophet, the Pharisees felt that they had to expose Jesus for opposing Moses. How would they do it? They would confront Him with a situation that would corner Him into contradicting a clear Mosaic statute. Thus entered the "woman caught in adultery." The Pharisees would test the Prophet by

¹⁰ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978), pp. 637-38.

¹¹ Isaiah referred to Moses' watering experience (43:20) and paralleled a future watering to the pouring out of the Spirit (44:3). Interestingly, Aileen Guilding has pointed out that these passages in Isaiah (as well as Deut. 8:15) were lectionary readings during the Feast of Tabernacles (*The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960], p. 105).

¹² Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, p. 643. Godet observed that the Pharisees had made a mistake in pointing out that "no prophet arises out of Galilee" (7:52), since Isaiah 9:1 prophesied the preaching of the Messiah in Galilee. Also Jonah was from Gath-hepher in the region of Galilee (2 Kings 14:25).

utilizing laws in chapters surrounding the prophecy of the Prophet in Deuteronomy 18:15. The totality of the question concerning the adulteress, the witnesses, and her punishment came from Deuteronomy 17:5-7; 19:15-21; and 22:22-27.¹³

The Test of the Prophet in John 7:53-8:11

THE END OF THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

The statement "And everyone went to his home" (John 7:53) concludes the previous section regarding the Feast of Tabernacles (7:1-52), and particularly the section beginning in verse 37, which states, "Now on the last day, the great day of the feast." Each year during the Feast of Tabernacles all the celebrants left their homes and passed the night in booths in remembrance of God's provision during the journey in the wilderness. Thus the statement that they were going back to their homes (in contrast to their life in booths of the former seven or eight days¹⁴) is a fitting conclusion to the feast.

By contrast Jesus went to the Mount of Olives (8:1). Far from intending to show Jesus had no place to lay His head, which is not a major theme in John,¹⁵ the author was pointing out Christ's purpose. While men could easily forget the messianic implications of the Feast of Tabernacles and the coincidence of meeting the long awaited Messiah (7:40-52), Jesus continued on with His messianic purpose.¹⁶

THE PROPHET AS A TEACHER OF GOD'S WORD

Jesus began to teach in the temple "early in the morning" (8:2). In the Book of John such descriptive chronology is more than a time marker; it also has Johannine symbolism.¹⁷ Much like breaking of

¹³ It is appropriate to note that the context surrounding the foretelling of the Prophet is also concerned with the tests of a false prophet (Deut. 18:20). The Pharisees may have felt that they were following the commands in Deuteronomy by exposing Jesus.

¹⁴ There is a question whether the feast lasted seven or eight days (Johnson, "A Re-examination of the Pericope Adulterae, John 7:53-8:11," pp. 249-62).

¹⁵ This is a major theme in Luke, especially 9:53-62, where Christ spoke of discipleship and the need to subject everything to the purpose of the Messiah.

¹⁶ John seems to be making a comparison with Zechariah 14 and the Feast of Tabernacles described there as a result of the return of the Messiah. According to Zechariah 14 the Messiah will return and rid Jerusalem of her oppressors, and the Feast of Tabernacles will be celebrated during the Kingdom. According to John 7 the people seemingly wondered whether Jesus was the Christ, the One who would usher in that final Feast of Tabernacles. But while the wonderers seemed content to leave the question unanswered personally and went to their homes, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives, the exact place where the conquering Messiah of Zechariah 14 will make His appearance known (v. 4).

¹⁷ The Gospel of John includes only two references to early morning (8:2 and 21:4).

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the earthly light of dawn above the horizon, Jesus was about to demonstrate that He, as the Prophet, is "the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man" (1:9).¹⁸

In the temple Jesus "began to teach" (8:2). The Messiah/Prophet (7:40-52) was to be a teacher, for, as Moses wrote, the Prophet would speak the words God put in His mouth. "I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deut. 18:18).

If Jesus was the Prophet, it was necessary that He be a Teacher of the Word of God. To emphasize that, John pointed out that Jesus "sat down" (John 8:2), the position of a teacher in Judaism.¹⁹

THE PHARISEES AS THE TESTERS

A certain crime. After identifying the principal character as Jesus, the Teacher of the Scriptures, John introduced His antagonists—the scribes and Pharisees (8:3). This is the only place in the Book of John where the scribes are mentioned. This is appropriate for here Jesus is presented as a Teacher of the Law. And whom could the Pharisees find more qualified to confront such an "alleged" Teacher than the scribes? It was not Christ against the adulteress, nor the scribes and Pharisees against the adulteress, but the Pharisees against Christ, with the scribes supporting the Pharisees with their knowledge of the Law. The adulteress was simply the foil against which this conflict took place.

John pointed out that the woman had committed adultery and had been caught. There was no question that this was a fact.²⁰ The Pharisees were certain that Jesus could not avoid their intended question on the basis of any doubt about the circumstances. A woman had been caught breaking the Mosaic Law, specifically the seventh commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." And this was restated in Deuteronomy 22:22-27, a Mosaic statute not far from the prophecy of the greater Prophet.

John has seven references to night: three referring to Nicodemus' secret night visit (3:2; 7:50 [Majority Text]; 19:39), one to Judas' scheming departure from the last supper (13:30), one to the disciples' unsuccessful fishing expedition (21:3), and two to the absence of the true Light (9:4; 11:10).

¹⁸ In the verse immediately following the pericope Jesus claimed to be the Light of the world. The Pharisees would be confronted by the light and would oppose the light, for their deeds were evil (John 3:19).

¹⁹ Zane C. Hodges, "The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11): Exposition" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (January-March 1980): 43.

²⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 887. Morris notes that the word "caught" properly denoted "caught in the act of stealing," but came to be used of other offenses. It left no room for doubt.

The picture is completed by the phrase, "and having set her in the midst" (John 8:3). Jesus, the Teacher of the Law, was on one side, the scribes (the official interpreters of the Law) were with the Pharisees on the other side, and the woman who embodied the issue at hand was in the middle.²¹ The sides were divided clearly. The crime was certain.

Certain witnesses. The Pharisees said to Jesus, "'Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act'" (8:4). In addressing Jesus as teacher, they were not speaking in jest. They were acknowledging Him as a Teacher of the Law in order to show that He was a false teacher and thus a false prophet.²² They were not considering Him a judge, for Jesus had no civil authority.²³ As a Teacher of the Law He was set up to hear their testimony as witnesses. The testimony that the woman was in the "very act" was clearly eyewitness.²⁴

The Pharisees continued, "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women" (v. 5a). By the use of the pronoun "us," they were attesting that they were the very witnesses, for the Law proclaimed the witnesses should be the first to do the stoning (Deut. 17:6-7).²⁵ Thus the certain crime was attested by certain witnesses, again from the near context of the greater Prophet of Deuteronomy.

A certain punishment. The Pharisees and the scribes made it clear that they had Moses on their side. They said, "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women" (John 8:5). Deuteronomy 22:24 was clear. She was to be stoned. Now the certain crime, attested by certain witnesses, had a certain punishment.

²¹ Godet (*Commentary on John's Gospel*, p. 647) and Morris (*The Gospel according to John*, p. 887), as well as others, have seen here a courtroom scene in which Christ was being forced to be a judge concerning the woman. However, it is clear from verse 4 that the Pharisees were confronting Him as teacher, not judge, and were asking Him to interpret. Since the Pharisees were on one side and the Lord on the other, they expected Him to offer an interpretation contrary to Moses. This refutes the idea that they were trying to trap Him against Roman authority so that He could not win, as in the question of tribute to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17).

²² Moses, after speaking of the Prophet (18:15-19), had given tests for false prophets (18:20-22). In view of the thorough use of the Deuteronomy context, it seems that the Pharisees felt it their obligation to prove that He was not from God.

²³ Allison A. Trites proposes that this was a courtroom scene with Christ as the judge ("The Woman Taken in Adultery," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 [April-June 1974]: 137). However, Christ was not being set up here as a judge. He most certainly had no civil authority granted to Him. It is questionable whether the Romans would have done anything if the Jews *had* stoned her. There is no indication that the Pharisees intended to carry out an assenting decision. Jesus had no civil authority to judge; only the Sanhedrin had that right. The Pharisees were simply asking Him whether He would affirm the Mosaic commandment as a Teacher of the Law.

²⁴ See Leon Morris for a discussion concerning the necessity of the witnesses to observe the actual act (*The Gospel according to John*, p. 885).

²⁵ The Lord also confirmed them as witnesses in His statement in verse 7.

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A certain case. They felt that Jesus had opposed Moses when He had broken the Sabbath (5:12, 18), yet He had claimed that Moses was against them. They expected Him again to contradict Moses with His emphasis on grace, as He had when they had observed that He extended grace to a crippled man on the Sabbath.

Then they asked Jesus, "What then do You say?" (8:5). Would He follow Moses' pronouncement or not?²⁶ They felt sure Jesus would not condemn the woman, and therefore He would be disobeying Moses' command. John revealed that He had not judged the Samaritan for her loose living (4:18), and had pointed out to Nicodemus that He had not come to condemn but to save (3:17). Surely they were irritated at this One who seemed to avoid the emphasis they had placed on condemnation required by the Law. What could be a better test case than that of adultery, a crime with a certain punishment from the very chapters of Deuteronomy's greater Prophet?

A certain maliciousness. Obviously this was a setup, in which the Pharisees were "testing Him," pitting Christ against Moses, so "they might have grounds for accusing Him" (8:6). This was the whole purpose of this incident—to present clear evidence to the people that Jesus was a false prophet.

With this situation, the Pharisees assumed they now had trapped Jesus, who claimed to be the Prophet. If He were the Prophet spoken of in Deuteronomy 18, then He had to follow Moses' Law and condemn the woman. But if He did not condemn her, He would be violating the Law and could not be the predicted Prophet. What would Jesus do?

THE RESPONSE OF THE PROPHET

Jesus identified as the Lawgiver. "But Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground. . . . And again He stooped down, and wrote on the ground" (8:6b, 8). The suggestions as to what Jesus wrote on the ground are numerous. Some say He wrote the judgment "stoning,"²⁷ and others suggest He wrote the sins of the witnesses, which they thought were secret.²⁸ However, there is no textual evidence that *what* He wrote was significant. The important thing is *that* He wrote. Further, the Pharisees reacted not to what Jesus

²⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1983), p. 415. Bruce agrees that the test here was to pit Jesus against Moses.

²⁷ Some suggest that Jesus wrote down Deuteronomy 22:22-24 (requiring stoning for those found committing adultery), and that the second writing was Deuteronomy 19:16-19 (on false witness). Morris (*The Gospel according to John*, p. 888) and Godet (*Commentary on John's Gospel*, p. 647) review the various options.

²⁸ F. F. Bruce gives this as a possibility ("The Woman Taken in Adultery," *The Witness* 110 [August 1980]: 233).

wrote on the ground but to what He said (v. 9a). The importance is in what Jesus *did* and what He *said*, not what He wrote.

Sitting as a teacher (v. 2), Jesus stooped down and "with His finger wrote on the ground." Why is this mentioned? This alludes to the fact that the Law was written by the "finger of God" (Deut. 9:10).²⁹ Regardless of what Jesus wrote, John was suggesting that Jesus was claiming to be the actual Writer of the Law. Though the Pharisees questioned whether Jesus would contradict Moses, Jesus was pointing out that it was not Moses who wrote the Law, but Jesus, as God Himself.³⁰ This view is reinforced in that "again He stooped down and wrote on the ground" (John 8:8), thus alluding to God's writing on the tablets of stone a second time.³¹ Jesus replied to the Pharisees' assumption that He would go against the Law of Moses by saying in effect, "How can I go against the Law of Moses? I wrote the Law of Moses!"

The Pharisees identified as malicious witnesses. Between Jesus' demonstrations of His deity (writing on the ground twice, vv. 6, 8) Jesus said to the Pharisees, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7). Jesus' "inclusio" signals that this statement was to be found within the Law. This was true, for stated in the same Deuteronomy context were the words, "The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst" (Deut. 17:7).

Jesus acknowledged the valid application of the Mosaic Law to the situation before Him, with its crime, punishment, and witnesses. Then He took the situation further, using the Law that He wrote. Jesus offered them, as witnesses, the first stone, and told them to carry out the sentence as stated in the Mosaic Law.³² However, He

²⁹ Zane C. Hodges makes a similar point about the "finger of God," and indicates a reference to Exodus 31:18 ("The Woman Taken in Adultery [John 7:53-8:11]: Exposition," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 [January-March 1980]: 46). It is interesting that Deuteronomy (from which all the references in this Johannine pericope are taken), when speaking of that event, also refers to "the finger of God" (Deut. 9:10).

³⁰ One of John's themes is that Jesus is the Yahweh of the Old Testament (see, e.g., 1:1 and 8:58). Christ's claim to be the writer of the Law would not be curious in the argument of John.

³¹ Hodges points out that Exodus mentions the "finger of God" only in the record of the first writing of the tablets and not in the second writing ("The Woman Taken in Adultery [John 7:53-8:11]: Exposition," p. 46). So also in John 8 the finger of Christ is mentioned only in the record of His first writing.

³² Jesus was not merely speaking "tongue in cheek" when He told them to cast the first stone. Stephen A. James points out that "the text clearly commanded any qualified witness to begin the execution by casting the first stone" ("The Adulteress and the Death Penalty," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 [March-May 1979]: 53).

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did something else. In calling for them to be "without sin" He identified another Mosaic requirement for the proposed action, namely, that witnesses be nonmalicious:

If a malicious³³ witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the LORD. . . . and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. . . . Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot (Deut. 19:16-19, 21).

As the Writer of the Law, Christ was showing He knew all its requirements. They had alluded to Deuteronomy 17 and 23 and He referred to Deuteronomy 19. It is important to note that Christ spoke in verse 7 not to the general crowd, but to the Pharisees,³⁴ since the crowd had not testified as witnesses against the woman.

The passage Christ used as the basis of His charge was to be applied to the witnesses. Besides offering the Pharisees the Mosaic solution, "cast the first stone," He questioned their validity as witnesses. If they were malicious, they were subject to the very death they had proposed for the adulterers. A nonmalicious, objective witness was required by the Mosaic Law. Jesus knew they were testifying against her, not out of a pure heart of concern for justice in Israel but "testing Him, in order that they might have grounds for accusing Him."³⁵

The Greek word for "without sin" (v. 7) has been discussed extensively. Some say it refers to a specific sin, whereas others suggest it means sinlessness.³⁶ However, the context shows that in this

³³ The word for "malicious" is defined as "a witness that promotes violence and wrong" (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1980). It is used in Exodus 23:1-2 to denote those who would pervert justice. In Ezekiel 22:6 and Zephaniah 3:4 the word is used to speak of the misuse of the Law by priests for their own selfish purposes.

³⁴ Stephen A. James clearly pointed out that the content of the pericope is limited to the dialogue between Jesus and the accusers (8:4-9) and Jesus and the accused (8:10-11). He states, "There is no indication that Jesus directed any of his remarks to the crowd that overheard the exchange" (James, "The Adulteress and the Death Penalty," p. 47).

³⁵ *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* defines "malicious" (ססן) as perversion of justice in a variety of forms (4:478-87). The instigators of maliciousness are those who do violence to the Law, who use it for their own benefit (p. 479). The source may be either "greedy desire or hate" (p. 482). Here they had perverted justice by attempting to create a facade of being concerned about justice with regard to the adulteress while really attempting to try Jesus. They had been dishonest with their selfish purpose.

³⁶ Morris holds that it is general sinlessness (*The Gospel according to John*, p. 889). Hodges ("The Woman Taken in Adultery [John 7:53-8:11]: Exposition," p. 48) and F. F. Bruce ("The Woman Taken in Adultery," *The Witness* 10 [August 1980]: 233), both hold that it is a specific sin. Bruce holds that it was adultery. Hodges agrees and adds

passage the word specifically means a malevolent witness.³⁷ They were unconcerned about justice, but were using her in order to accuse Him. It was a trap, laid with malignant intent.

THE RESULT OF THE CONTROVERSY

"And 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 midst" (8:9).

Apparently each of the Pharisees was weighing in his mind the risk of pursuing his hypocrisy further. For a Pharisee to defend himself as a guileless witness, when it was obvious to all involved that he was not, would be to subject himself to the possibility of receiving her punishment. To abandon his own claim as a valid witness would be tantamount to a confession that he was malevolent. The Pharisees had attempted to trap Jesus, but now *they* were trapped by the same Law. So each Pharisee, in his desire to avoid the very stones he had suggested for another, overcame his pride and walked out of the temple area.³⁸

John was probably indicating more than that they simply filed out from the eldest to the youngest. The word "eldest" when applied to the chief priests and Pharisees,³⁹ implied their position of honor.⁴⁰ The older ones, who would have been especially familiar

that it was likely sin committed during the Feast of Tabernacles. However, there is nothing in the text to support the accusation of general imperfection in the Pharisees, nor is there any hint of their clandestine adulterous affairs. What is clear is that they were deceitful men, witnessing to a crime with which they were unconcerned, in order to bring about a transgression on the part of Jesus. The word here for "without sin" is used in the Septuagint in Deuteronomy 29:19 to denote "guiltless." It is related in that context to one with righteous motives, contrasted to one with deceptive motives.

³⁷ For an excellent discussion of the sin and its applicability to the Pharisees as witnesses in this context see James, "The Adulteress and the Death Penalty," p. 48. James lists other suggestions as to the sins of the witnesses: (a) failure to warn her, (b) conspiracy between the woman's husband and the witnesses to plot for her execution, and (c) failure to deliver both guilty parties for the trial. Morris adds that apparently there was a plot against her (*The Gospel according to John*, p. 887). However, there is no explicit textual evidence for any of these suggestions. The evidence in verse 8:5a is clear: they were not objective in their accusations.

³⁸ Morris points out that the word *καταλείπω* (used here of Jesus being "left") is used of Levi's abandoning his position as tax collector to follow Jesus (Luke 5:28) and of a man's dying and leaving his wife (Mark 12:19) (*The Gospel according to John*, p. 890).

³⁹ Bruce agrees that it was likely in this group that some of the Pharisees present were members of the Sanhedrin (*The Gospel of John*, p. 414). In light of the preceding passage (7:45-52) it seems likely, especially with scribes present, that the Sanhedrin may have been involved personally and were present. This would account for the use of *πρεσβύτερος* (8:9).

⁴⁰ Bloomfield, *The Greek Testament*, 1:440.

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with the Scriptures, recognized more quickly their guilt under the very Mosaic Law by which they had proposed to convict another.

After the false witnesses left, Jesus "was left alone," that is, He was the only one left of those involved in her prosecution. Only one witness remained, and it was Jesus. He was the only objective, non-malicious witness.

When Jesus "straightened up" the second time (v. 10), He applied the Law just as He had done after He "straightened up" the first time (v. 7). He asked the woman where the witnesses were who had come to accuse her, for the Law required two or three witnesses. Verse 11 records the only time this woman spoke in this incident. She simply said, "No one, Lord."⁴¹

When Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more," He was demonstrating His allegiance to the smallest point of the Mosaic Law.⁴² He was the only witness left, but according to the Law one witness was not enough:⁴³ "On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness" (Deut. 17:6). And yet, though the Law prevented one witness from bringing forth a guilty verdict, Jesus, as God, could have judged her. However, He did not come to condemn, but to save (John 3:17).⁴⁴ The day of judgment would come, but it was not yet present (5:27-29).⁴⁵

Christ had told the crippled man to avoid sinning (5:14). Here He told the woman the same thing. It would be expected of the One who claimed to be the Prophet to tell her to obey the Law. Someday

⁴¹ It is wrong to assume that these words suggest repentance on her part. The woman was simply the point of contention between Christ and the Pharisees. The meaning of *κύριος* has been debated. However, it should not be pressed too far. There is no contextual evidence that she recognized Him as anything more than a teacher who was giving an interpretation of the Law based on her case. She was probably showing respect in addressing Him as "Sir." The woman of Samaria used the same term (4:11), and undoubtedly at that time she did not know Him as more than a respected man.

The use of "Woman" (8:10) as a title of respect is Johannine. It is interesting that the Samaritan woman episode used the same terms "Sir" (4:11, 15, 19) and "Woman" (5:21) as are used in this pericope.

⁴² See R. D. Mawdsley, "Capital Punishment in Genesis 9:6," *Central Bible Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1975): 24, for agreement on this point.

⁴³ Jesus Himself quoted this only six verses later, "Even in your Law it has been written, that the testimony of two men is true" (8:17).

⁴⁴ This point about Christ not condemning her because of the stated purpose of His ministry (3:17) is noted by many including Bloomfield (*The Greek Testament*, 1:442).

⁴⁵ John presented Jesus as the Bearer of grace and truth. The judgment that Christ avoided in John's Gospel will come as revealed in John's Apocalypse. It should also be noted that "judgment" or "condemnation" and Christ's avoidance of such does not infer that He was not willing to point out sin and evil, but only that the day of eschatological judgment was not yet present (John 5:22-30).

she would come into judgment. She had a choice. Would she listen to the Prophet, as she was instructed to do in Deuteronomy 18:15, or would she not?

Conclusion

The Pharisees had brought a certain crime (the woman in adultery), had brought along the scribes to quote a certain judgment (stoning), and had claimed to be certain witnesses ("this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act"). The stage was set. Would Jesus agree with Moses and them and condemn her, or would He disagree and not condemn her?

Reviewing the case, Jesus brought forth the judgment, "Stone her." Unfortunately for the Pharisees, He had required, as the Law had stated, that the witnesses be qualified.

The Pharisees who were accusing the woman, not for the good of Israel but to trap Jesus, were stuck. They knew they were malicious. Thus they had to step down or else incur the punishment required of malicious witnesses—the very stoning they desired for the accused!

Jesus pronounced the final decree. Since He was the only witness left, and the Mosaic Law required two, she was free. But the Prophet instructed her to avoid all guilt under the Law, since Deuteronomy 18:15 said the people were to listen to the Prophet. John 7:53–8:11 shows in numerous ways that Jesus is indeed the Prophet of whom Moses wrote.