

MEN AND WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

NCTM. Thursday a.m. Class. Sept. 16th. 1993. G.C. Bingham

Third Term Course: Men and Women of the Bible

Study Eight: The Woman Liberated from Adultery

Introduction: Passages John 7:53-8:1-11; Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22; Romans 8: 1.

The Story and its Background

The story is simple. A woman is taken in the very act of adultery and is hauled before Jesus, undoubtedly with a view to testing him. Whilst she stands exposed to shame he does not look at her, but writes in the dirt. Refusing to answer them directly as to her judgement, he then stands and asks who is without sin that he is prepared to stone the woman for her sin. The critics of Jesus, along with others, melt away. No one remains to accuse so the situation is changed. She is free to leave. Jesus warns her against further acts of sin.

Note: Whilst this story is contained in ancient manuscripts of John's Gospel it is thought to be Synoptic rather than Johannine, for very strong reasons. It seems to be Lukan writing. Even so, it is considered an authentic happening.

Points to be Considered

- (i) Jesus was teaching early, but the crowd listening may have melted away prior to the scribes and Pharisees coming to him. He seems to address them in particular, and they seem to have singled him out. We cannot be wholly certain.
- (ii) They are obviously to catch him out in some way.
- (iii) The woman has been caught in the very act of adultery (in coitu) or she could not have been charged with adultery.
- (iv) Since two had committed adultery it is strange that the man is also not present. This seems to prove it was a trick situation. It could have been that the man not present helped to 'set up' the situation.
- (v) Technically the woman could not have been killed by stoning unless she were a 'virgin betrothed to a husband' (Deut. 22:23). It is not said that this was the case.
- (vi) Stoning and killing, it seemed, had fallen into disuse. The adulterous man would pay compensation to the offended husband. If the woman were not the offender she would leave the husband and take her dowry with her. If the woman were stoned, then the offended husband would retain the dowry. We can draw our conclusions from such principles.

The Attack on Jesus

The scribes and Pharisees-not mentioned as such together in John's Gospel, elsewhere-were together, and, as we have observed were setting up the situation to catch Jesus. If he refused to say she should be stoned they would accuse of him of opposing the law of Moses. If he were to agree to her stoning he would have lost the sympathy of many or be branded as a harsh person and lose those who saw him as a loving and liberating Master. The Jews were not allowed, technically, to kill a person since judgement belonged to the Romans. Jesus was placed by them in a predicament and a dilemma.

Jesus' Method of Dealing with the Matter of the Scribes and Pharisees

We notice that Jesus simply 'doodled in the dust'. It has been surmised he wrote something which might have shamed his opponents. This is speculation. He simply refused to answer them. Then he stood and faced them, undoubtedly staring them in the eyes. He said, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.' By saying this he did not deny she should be stoned, nor say that she should. They were to take the initiative.

Guilt undoubtedly came to them under his holy gaze. Some versions have it, 'Each, being convicted in his own conscience, went away, from the eldest to the youngest'. Whilst the word 'conscience' is never used in the Gospels, the idea is often present. None was free from the sin of adultery, and so they were forced to leave. Having spoken to them Jesus knelt again to write in the dust, and this gave them the occasion to leave. They could do nothing else. The charge had been exploded.

Jesus' Dealing with the Woman

(i) Had the woman been convicted of adultery and not stoned her shame would have been known throughout the city.

(ii) Had she been killed the matter of shame would be ended but a dastardly death would have been executed as it was not the custom of the day.

(iii) In either case she would have been left with her guilt, nothing forgiven or healed.

(iv) Jesus asked, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' If no one had condemned then the matter was finished. Since he was not her accuser or judge, she could have left.

(v) He gave her the clearance of 'No condemnation' (Rom. 8: 1). As in other cases of forgiveness which he pronounced the woman went free.

The Woman's Situation and Jesus' Healing of it

(i) She was an adulteress. This was reprehensible in Israel, in Jerusalem. Her reputation was ruined.

(ii) There is always a cause back of an event such as this. What was the cause? We only know it would be a fearfully wrong one.

(iii) The woman had no future. Gossip would spread, and her life would be intolerable.

(iv) She was one who had committed the sin the others were forced to admit had been theirs also. Its effect would go on in her life.

(v) She must have burned with shame before him as had the others, yet his attitude to her was not judgemental.

(vi) His 'no condemnation' cleared her. The gossip would have stopped at this event in the temple courtyard. He had spoken to her conscience and purified her guilt. He had set her free, yes, but only to refuse this sin and others with it. He had killed the sin at the root. He had gone back beyond the cause to the general sinfulness of the human race and dealt with that matter (cf. Rom. 6:12-14), since the power of sin lies in guilt.

The woman had come under grace.