

LESSONS FROM A CONTROVERSIAL CASE

Who was more guilty the woman who was caught in the act of committing adultery or the group of men who accused her but let the man whom she was caught with go free? It is obvious today that both were guilty. The case was more controversial two thousand years ago, however, when women had few rights. In this study, the woman and her accusers were double trouble, but the Lord Jesus handled them both. The interactive commentary on these pages are from an imaginary [Literature Class](#), led by Dr. Penwell, the English professor at fictional Quest Bible College.

Dr. Penwell (on stylistic proofs of the story's authenticity)

Some scholars claim that John 7:53-8:11 is a fictional story which was added to the Gospel by someone other than John. I disagree for the simple reason that there are many things in the story that are typical of John's writing style. For instance, compare the following: "sin no more" in John 8:11 with the same phrase in 5:14, "woman" in John 8:10 with the same in 2:4, 4:21, and 19:26, and "This they said" in 8:6 with similar phrases in 6:6, 7:39, 11:51, 12:6, and 21:19. The story itself shows that it is not a forgery! What do you think?

Frank (on the difficulty talking about the woman)

I don't doubt the story in any way, but frankly it is not easy to explain to Sunday school children. I suspect that may be why some in the early church had trouble with it as well.

Dr. Penwell (on why some in the early church probably did not like the story)

For sure, some early on did not appreciate the story. Probably that was because they did not think that the woman should have been allowed to go free. I believe that is why some of the oldest manuscripts do not contain this story. Most of the nine hundred or so hand-written manuscripts do have it however. Moreover, most literary scholars say that the story fits the time period so well that it is doubtful that it was simply made up by someone later on. I agree.

Ed (on what children like to talk about)

Sunday school children are not interested in the debate among scholars about the story, but they sure are interesting in what Jesus wrote with his finger on the ground. Since we don't know the answer, I let the kids have fun guessing. I suppose that could be a waste of time, but I believe that it helps us think about what happened and the purpose of the story.

What did Jesus write?

Dr. Penwell (on the good side of the unknown)

Show me a story in which everything is explained and there are no mysteries, and I will show you a story that is boring and much too long.

Dr. Penwell (on the need to read the story more than once)

Many assume that it is enough to read through a story or a book only once. That is rarely the case. So before we start on our first worksheet in this study, read through the passage again, focusing on the adulterous woman. [a few minutes later] What are your first thoughts about her?

Frank (on very little being reported about the woman)

Well, frankly, there is not much to say. We know the woman was guilty, but little else about her.

Red (on three key questions about the woman)

I read through the story three more times and came up with three questions. 1.) I wonder how the woman's accusers were able to catch her in the act; 2.) I wonder why she said so little; and 3.) I wonder how it would change the impact of the story if we knew a lot more about her.

Mark the lines below as either correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A () The woman is not described in detail.

- A-1 () We do not know what she looked like.
 A-2 () She may have been well known within the city.
 A-3 () We do not know her name, age, or anything about her family.
 A-4 () If more were recorded about her, it would draw attention away from Jesus.

B () The woman was obviously guilty.

- B-1 () She was caught in the act (8:3-4).
 B-2 () Jesus said she could be executed (8:7).
 B-3 () Jesus told her to go and sin no more (8:11).
 B-4 () Jesus spoke to her harshly. (Compare 8:11 with 5:14.)

C () The woman was treated unfairly by her accusers.

- C-1 () The adulterous man was not accused.
 C-2 () There was probably a plot to entrap and use her.
 C-3 () She was used like a pawn in chess to get at Jesus (8:6).
 C-4 () Jesus did not come to judge and condemn (1:16-17, 3:17, 8:15-16).

D () The woman was mostly silent.

- D-1 () There was nothing she could say to defend herself.
 D-2 () She was like the harlot in Proverbs chapter seven.
 D-3 () She asked Jesus to be merciful to her (8:11).
 D-4 () It was wise for her to say very little.
 D-5 () Perhaps she had repented.

Indy (on the number of accusers)

I wonder how many accusers there were. Since they went away individually one by one (8:9), there could not have been many, probably ten or less. There was a larger group of other people present to listen to the Lord (8:2). So I don't think the number of accusers was intimidating.

Dr. Penwell (on the accusers' moral weakness)

I agree, but I think the main point seen in the story regarding the accusers is their moral weakness. That is what the Lord exposed. They appeared to have a rock-solid case against the woman at the beginning, but it all fell apart because of their own sin (8:7-9). They were all disqualified witnesses.

Red (on the conscience of each accusers)

I wonder if their consciences bothered them (8:9, G-4). Most commentators don't seem to think so.

Mark the lines below as either correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

E () **The scribes and Pharisees were legal experts.**

- E-1 () They cited the authority of Moses (8:5).
 E-2 () King Herod consulted the scribes in Matthew 2:4.
 E-3 () The scribes main work was making copies of manuscripts.
 E-4 () Each of them knew that he was not qualified to throw the first stone.

F () **The scribes and Pharisees were intimidating at first.**

- F-1 () They came as a group (8:3).
 F-2 () They probably did not ask politely in 8:5.
 F-3 () They kept on asking the same question (8:7).
 F-4 () The scribes had high social status (Lk. 9:22, 20:19, 22:2).

G () **The scribes and Pharisees were sinful, immoral, and deceitful.**

- G-1 () They were only partly truthful about the woman (8:4-5).
 G-2 () They would not have left if they were not sinful (8:8-9).
 G-3 () They were not without deceit like Nathaniel (1:47).
 G-4 () They probably did not really fear God.

H () **Jesus exposed the moral weakness of the scribes and Pharisees (8:7-9).**

- H-1 () They were weak because of their sinfulness (8:9).
 H-2 () They were not able to force Jesus to answer them (8:7).
 H-3 () They were weak because they were conscious of their sinfulness.
 H-4 () They probably read what Jesus wrote on the ground with his finger.
 H-5 () They may have been afraid of those in the crowd (8:2, 12) who knew them.

Commentary from various perspectives as overheard in a Literature class at imaginary Quest Bible College

Dr. Penwell (on the Double Top Bible study method)

A great way to understand narrative Bible passages is to describe the main characters. We have done that using our first Double Top worksheets. What do you think about the results?

Frank (on the need to focus on the Lord Jesus)

Well, frankly, the real main character is the Lord Jesus. Why isn't there a worksheet about him?

Dr. Penwell (on various references to Jesus on the worksheets)

Actually, Jesus is mentioned directly or indirectly several times on both worksheets. Nobody else could have so wonderfully dealt with both the woman (B-3, C-4) and her accusers (H, H-2). Any ordinary human being would have sided with one or the other. Jesus did not (B-2, H-2).

Frank (on the sinfulness of the accusers)

True, but frankly, I wish the Lord had come down even harder on the scribes and Pharisees, because they were like pimps, shamefully dragging around an adulteress in order to make a quick theological 'profit.' It looks like they were even willing to desecrate the temple in order to do so (8:2-3).

Dr. Penwell (on the accusers shameful actions)

Yes, the behavior of the scribes and Pharisees was shameful. It's obvious that they had entrapped the woman, (C-2, G-1), for otherwise they would not have been able to catch her in the act (8:4). In addition, the man who had committed adultery with her was probably one of their associates.

Red (on why the woman was not executed)

From my reading of the story, I believe the only reason the woman avoided execution was because the Lord showed that there were no witnesses among her accusers who had not committed adultery themselves (8:7-9). Thankfully, some of those in the crowd, would have known about the immorality of the woman's accusers (H-5). They were not really respected leaders (F-4). Ultimately, in order to properly describe the woman, I think we have to describe her accusers and even the crowd.

Ed (on what Jesus may have written on the ground)

Before we run out of time, I have a quick question. What do you think Jesus wrote on the ground? I've heard several theories, and one of the most popular is that he wrote the names of various women with whom the accusers had been involved sexually. I don't think that's it.

Dr. Penwell (on what Jesus may have written with his finger)

I don't believe that either for a couple reasons. First, anything that the Lord wrote, no matter what it was, would have been God's word. Writing the names of various sinful women may have contradicted his saving purpose (C-4). Second, I believe Jesus wrote, and thereby quoted, appropriate Scripture in a way that would have impressed the scribes and others who saw it (E-3, H-4). — By the way, this story has always encouraged me because it shows that Jesus, God in the flesh, was a Writer. *[There may be a parallel in this in Deut. 9:10.]*