

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

John 8:7, New Revised Standard Version, ue.

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

The spurious story.

In most Christian Bibles, at the beginning of Chapter 8 of the Gospel of John, is a story about a woman who was about to be stoned to death. Many Bibles mark this as not appearing in the oldest scrolls of the Gospel of John. In other words, John did not write it and it was inserted later. We'll get back to this. But briefly, Jesus has gone to the Mount of Olives, which looks down on Jerusalem. He then walks from there into the city and to the Temple. He begins to teach a gathering crowd. Then, the Pharisees drag out a woman who has been caught in an adulterous relationship. Their traditional punishment is to kill her. But then Jesus squats down and writes something with his finger in the dirt. We do not know what he writes. Jesus then stands up straight and says: *"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* He writes more in the dirt. The woman's accusers then slither away, one by one. Jesus finds himself standing before the woman, alone. This is their exchange:

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

This is a beautiful story and before looking at it more closely, it's disappointing that it was apparently added to the Gospel of John. It has a mysterious element to it. Did Jesus write the sins of the Pharisees in the dirt? Is that why they left? What did they think of him knowing their hidden secrets? More importantly, it shows the power and the extent of forgiveness. That is a huge thing in the teachings of Jesus. Part of the reason we forgive is that all of us need forgiveness, and we don't want to be hypocrites. That's another important thing about our faith.

But is it true that this story isn't biblical? Here are two interesting pieces of background information. First, there was an early Christian pastor named Papias. He was born around the year 60, not long after Jesus left the Earth. He recorded a rather similar story about Jesus, one that was being passed around during Papias' life. That story described Jesus doing much the same thing. There is a strong suspicion that this is the man who added this material to the Gospel of John - and added it in a very logical place as it turns out - because he saw the story as so compelling. Interestingly, later in the Gospel, at the end of Chapter 59, Jesus is about to be stoned (but he isn't). We get the feeling that Jesus is in a spiritual sense trading places with this condemned woman. It's also true that John tells us in his

Gospel that Jesus performed many other miracles that were not included in John's Gospel, and so it would make sense that there were other, true stories about him that were being passed around during the decades after Jesus' human life.

The second intriguing piece of information is that the writing in this passage is very unlike the writing in the rest of the Gospel of John – something that is not apparent in translation. But it very much resembles the erudite Greek grammar and vocabulary of Luke's writing. He wrote a Gospel and the Book of Acts. The story itself resembles the stories that Luke writes about. So, this story might have started out in the Gospel of Luke, or it might have come from a source that Luke used for other material in his Gospel. The overall fact is that most scholars consider this to be a true story about Jesus, not something invented by a transcriber.

Where does this leave us?

One way to look at this is that God seems to have gone to a lot of trouble to make sure that we didn't lose this story. So perhaps we should give it more than just typical attention for a Gospel story about Jesus. Maybe this is a very important story, one that God knew we would need.

Here is a take on this story that has been put forth. The Pharisees would have demanded that Jesus, too, condemn her to death. But of course, he couldn't do this. If he were to say, however, that they should show mercy on her, and offer

her forgiveness, then the Pharisees would have accused him of violating the law of Moses. Remember, the Pharisees were constantly trying to trap Jesus. In fact, some scholars have suggested that this entire situation was a set-up, and Jesus recognized the trap. Jesus then, as he often did, outsmarted those who were trying to entrap him. He wrote something on the ground, twice. What did he write? The sins of the Pharisees?

There is another theory. Here is something from the Book of Jeremiah:

*¹³ O LORD, the hope of Israel,
all who forsake you shall be put to shame;
those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth,
for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.*

We don't know if Jesus was hinting at this passage, which would have been very familiar to the Pharisees. This is from an oracle of the Prophet Jeremiah, words from God, spoken by the Prophet. After all, in a somewhat hypocritical way, these Pharisees would have taught from Jeremiah in the synagogue system, which they fostered. This verse does not mean that people who turn away from God will be remembered as evil because their names will be written down. This verse is from Chapter 17. Here is the first verse of that chapter:

***17** "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars,*

The Prophet says that the sins of the people of Israel will be written with an iron pen that has a diamond point, engraved on a tablet. The point is that their sins will never be forgotten. But later, we are told that the names of those who turn from God, these individuals, they will be written in earth. In other words, we will always remember the people of Israel, even if they sin, but individuals who deny their faith will be completely forgotten, as they will be written only in dirt, which blows away. Maybe Jesus was signaling to the Pharisees that they are nothing, they are just names written in dirt that will blow away a few minutes from now.

Our verse from the Gospel of John is one of the most quoted biblical verses: *“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”* We will most likely never know where the story of the adulterous woman originated. But God did indeed go to a lot of trouble to preserve it for us. We have all been raised with that lesson, to make sure that we answer for our own sins before we accuse someone else of theirs. When we look at our own past mistakes, what we want is mercy and forgiveness. But that’s not what we are likely to get if what we throw at other people is anger and vengeance.

There is a subtlety in this passage that many people have noted over the centuries. Mosaic law was very clear on one point. The Pharisees could not take only one party of the adulterous act and execute her. The law required that both

the woman and the man be killed. In fact, this appears twice in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, the core of ancient Jewish law. This is from Leviticus, Chapter 20: ¹⁰ *“If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.* And this is from the 22nd chapter of Deuteronomy: ²² *“If a man is discovered lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman.* The religious authorities who want to execute this woman are not only hypocrites. They are guilty of enforcing selective justice. Who knows, maybe the Pharisees were protecting this man and Jesus was writing his name in the dirt. We see that this story is very complex, very multi-faceted.

There is even more here. Let’s look again at the exchange between Jesus and the accused woman:

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ *She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”*

After the religious authorities who accuse this woman slip away, there is no one left to accuse her. Notice that Jesus acknowledges that she is indeed guilty. When he tells her to go on her way and to not sin again, he is assuming his role as God. There is a concept in U.S. law called “jury nullification”. This is what happens when a jury decides that a person is indeed technically guilty of a crime but decides to

return a non-guilty verdict anyway. This is what Jesus is doing. It's at the heart of forgiveness from God. We must acknowledge that we have done wrong, that we are not innocent. Then we are free to accept the forgiveness of God. God's forgiveness does not come until we essentially plead guilty. It might be important here to note that Jesus does not explicitly offer the woman forgiveness. This might be because she does not specifically confess her sins. This woman might be very much like us: on the cusp of forgiveness - but unwilling to fully confess.

There is yet something else in this passage that is often overlooked. The entire scene goes against ancient Mosaic law. In the Book of Deuteronomy, a very important text with respect to Israelite justice, Moses gives this command, with the authority of God: *Choose for each of your tribes individuals who are wise, discerning, and reputable, and I will make them your leaders.*' He goes on to say: *'Give the members of your community a fair hearing and judge rightly between one person and another, whether kin or resident alien.'* The Pharisees had no authority to accuse, try, convict, and execute this woman. She had a right to a fair trial, with wise, reputable, discerning people giving judgement. Maybe what Jesus was writing in the dirt is that when humans choose to execute someone, they had better make sure they are not mistaking themselves for God.

The story of the adulterous woman is a story we should be very thankful survived the unraveling of two millennia. The Gospels only give us a taste of the life of Jesus. There are certainly many, many important things that he said and did that are not recorded in the Bible. But these snapshots of the life of Jesus tell us much of what we need to know as people of faith. In fact, they tell us everything. For me, the bottom line of the story of the adulterous woman is that all of us are guilty of dishonoring our God by our actions and our words. Here is Proverbs 29:23:

*²³ A person's pride will bring humiliation,
but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.*

When I think about those religious authorities, men who, even if it was illegal according to the law of Moses, could execute someone, I see them primarily as men who have been corrupted by their own pride. Biblically, Pharisees were supposed to be experts in their system of law. They were supposed to be scholars and highly pious people. They were the spokesmen for their people. They were extremely influential, highly respected, and represented the core of Orthodox Judaism. But as we have seen over and over in our own time, and our own nation, people who are honored, who are powerful, who sit in the seat of judgement, are often destroyed by their own pride. Jesus took these men and brought them humiliation. He caused them to slither away. One of the most important things we can do in

life is to watch our pride. It can destroy us. That is what happened to the Pharisees who sat in judgement of a woman. We want to be very careful that we never end up like them.

Over the centuries the story of the adulterous woman that we find in the Gospel of John has been thought of as being spurious. That means that it is false, that it is not biblical, that it does not represent the actions of Jesus, that it was added by someone like a scribe. That scribe might have been well intentioned, taking a story that struck him as truly reflective of Jesus and forcing it into a Gospel so that it would not be forgotten. But opinion has changed, and now the story is mostly taken as being authentic. It is simply misplaced. The story does not sit in the original context in which it was written. In its complexity, its varied subtleties, and its spiritual depth, it certainly rings true. Most likely, either Luke wrote it, or it is an authentic story taken from a primary source that Luke used for the rest of his Gospel. This could have been from the testimony of an Apostle who spoke to Luke. It is a story about judgement, pride, and forgiveness. We should all read this story carefully and learn from it. As we proceed through life, when we are confronted with someone whom we believe has wronged us, we should *Let anyone among [us] who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.*

Please pray with me.

God, there is much about the Bible that we do not know. Where did the Gospel authors get their stories about the life of Jesus? What did they not tell us about Jesus' words and deeds? We know, God, that one thing we can count on is that the Bible is truth, and that you have preserved it with care. We deeply thank you for this. Amen.