

# JESUS AND THE WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY

## JOHN 8: 2-11

Women in the Bible Series

### OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, we are quick to judge others and slow to judge ourselves. Jesus' teachings encourage us to think, but we often choose simple answers rather than struggle with complexity. Guide us as we reflect on a passage that is familiar to many, but still has much to teach us.

### EXEGESIS AND REFLECTION

This story was not originally part of John's Gospel. It was added later. Most scholars think it had circulated for a long time, either orally or as part of a longer document that is now lost.

If this woman has been sentenced to death, why would anyone bring her to a controversial preacher to ask him to rule on the matter? The passage says her accusers wanted to “test” Jesus. The implication is that his critics suspected he would not agree with the stoning. Jesus responded to the test very cleverly, effectively saying that the woman should not be stoned but doing so in such a way that he did not contradict the law. It seems Jesus had a reputation for not being entirely supportive of the law. According to Mark, one of Jesus' first public acts was to break the law by picking grain on the Sabbath. He was eventually arrested after an undoubtedly illegal protest in the Jerusalem Temple.

Would Jesus have behaved differently if the alleged criminal had been a thief, murderer or rapist? “Adultery” had a specific meaning at the time: it involved a man having sex with someone else's wife. The marital status of the man was irrelevant. The book of Deuteronomy declares that the man and woman must both be executed. But this is not happening here! The Scribes and Pharisees do not appear to be following the Law of Moses themselves, as they have brought only the woman and not the man. Christian feminists argue that Jesus was challenging an entire system. “At the heart of the episode is precisely the redefining of sin,” says commentator Elizabeth Green. She believes that Jesus was challenging male assumptions about the sexual sinfulness of women.

Why was Jesus writing on the ground? There is a tradition that he was listing the sins of the accusers, although it is doubtful if he had time. Some believe he was drawing attention away from the woman, who may have been naked. Another possibility is that he was taking control of the situation by undermining expectations. We do not have to choose between these explanations: there could well be more than one reason. Perhaps the simplest answer is that Jesus was buying time as he thought about how to respond. Even in mainstream Christian theology, Jesus is regarded as fully human. It's easy to forget that.

## REFLECTION

Most readers have a positive response to this story. Church leaders have been full of praise for Jesus' behaviour but have often been quick to qualify their comments.

Sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin argued that Jesus was not saying that sinners could never judge sinners but was criticising hypocrites who do not acknowledge their own sins. Raymond Brown, one of the twentieth century's most prominent commentators on John's Gospel, insisted that "One should beware of attempts to make it a general norm forbidding enactment of capital punishment".

These sorts of comments sound suspiciously as if they are encouraging us to admire Jesus but not to follow his example. However, it is the case that Jesus tended to emphasise intentions and motives as well as consequences, so a case can be made that he was primarily drawing attention to the Pharisees' hearts. Against this, it can be argued that focusing on the Pharisees' intentions stops us from applying Jesus' teaching more widely.

How should we follow Jesus' example today? By looking into our hearts when we are inclined to judge others? By challenging sexist attitudes? By campaigning against the use of violence? By using clever tactics to resist injustice?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How would Jesus have behaved if he had been presented with both the man and the woman who had committed adultery? Would things have been any different?
- What relevance does this story have for how we regard violence?
- Does Jesus' way of dealing with the Pharisees' "test" teach us anything about responding to challenging questions today?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Guide us, loving God, in discerning how to act in the face of violence and injustice. Help us to follow Jesus' example of witnessing to your love – and in thinking about how to be effective as we do so. May Jesus' teachings and his spirit both inspire us.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist: God's radical notion that women are people too* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2013)
- Symon Hill, *The Upside-Down Bible: What Jesus really said about money, sex and violence* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2015)