

Narrative Criticism of John 8:1-11

In order to identify and discuss Johannine themes throughout John 8:1-11, I initially observe that the section fills a narrative gap. This gap occurs between Jesus' teaching at the temple on the Feast of Tabernacles throughout chapter 7,¹ and his Light of the World discourse in chapter 8:12-20.² In effect, John 8:1 is actually John 7:53, for the chapter begins not by initiating the narrative about the adulterous woman, but by stating how everyone went home after the Feast while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.³ This introduction concludes with

¹ Verses 7:1-13 discuss how Jesus went to the temple in secret in spite of telling his brothers he would not attend for his "time (had) not yet been fulfilled" (7:8), and the dialogue throughout verses 7:14-31 portray Jesus' vexation at the Jews' anger against him for curing a paralytic (5:1-9) on the sabbath when they already circumcised on the sabbath without cognitive disconnect (7:22-24). The remainder of the chapter portrays Jesus' high Christological claim that he was sent by God (7:28-29) resulting in his near arrest (7:32), his call for all who thirst to "come to (him) and drink" (7:37-39), and discussions about his messianic origins, where the Pharisee Nicodemus reappears from chapter 3:1-12 and reminds the Pharisees to give Jesus a fair hearing before condemning him (7:50-52). All serving as a proximate context for how Jesus deals with the adulterous woman in John 8:1-11, chapter 7 shows Jesus's authoritative teaching moving toward an observance of the law that emphasizes justice characterized by divine mercy and forgiveness, as well as a more consistent and holistic approach to its application. If it is permissible to circumcise on the sabbath, then it is likewise permissible to heal. If the anonymous partner whom the adulterous woman was having sex with is not even mentioned much less condemned throughout 8:1-11, why only apply the law to her? Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22, and Deuteronomy 22:23-24 all recommend death for both adulterous men and women. Nonetheless, a deeper fulfillment is at hand where people will realize that no one whatsoever is without sin. A complementary theme of new beginnings likewise informs the proximate context, particularly evident with the resurgence of Nicodemus, with whom Jesus had discussed the need to be "born from above" (3:3). All the themes referred to in this footnote are distinctly Johannine, where Jesus speaks with authority and self-assurance in his messianic identity.

² Perkins extends the discourse from 8:12 through 8:59, which is the remainder of the chapter – "Though (the story in 8:1-11) fills a 'gap' by providing a narrative before the discourse of 8:12-59, it has none of the characteristic features of Johannine style or theology. The copyist who inserted the story here may have thought that it illustrated 8:15, 'I pass judgment on no one,' and 8:46, 'Can anyone convict me of sin'" (Perkins 1990, 965), which as further proximate context to 8:1-11 again highlight a Johannine theme of Christ's sense of authority. He could judge but chooses not to, and acknowledges that he is above being convicted by others. As to the story being inserted by a copyist, see the footnote below.

³ Though this essay is intended to work with Johannine themes specifically, a brief overview of some Lukan material is inescapable at this point. This is due to the fact that mentioning the Mount of Olives provides a "Lukan touch, as often in Luke's Gospel Jesus withdraws on his own for prayer before major events (e.g., Luke 4:42; 6:12; 9:18; 11:1; 21:37-38; 22:39-46)" (Maloney 1998, 260). The reason that there is a "Lukan touch" at all in John 8:1-11 is due to the fact that the pericope "does not belong to the Fourth Gospel (cf. Brown, *Gospel* 1:332-338; Barret, *Gospel* 589; Pickering, 'John 7:53-8:11' 6-7)" (Maloney 1998, 259). Regarded as an intrusion, "this popular ancient tradition about Jesus, which 'floated' in written Jesus material, was incorporated into various manuscripts at different places in early textual traditions, mainly in the Fourth Gospel (after 7:36; 7:44; 7:52; or 21:25), but also in Luke (after Luke 21:38)" (Maloney 1998, 259). While "most ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of John lack 7:53-8:11" altogether, "some include the scene, but between 7:36 and 7:37, or at the end of the Gospel. Other ancient

Jesus' return to the temple area the following morning in John 8:2, and the narrative begins in earnest as the people gather to hear him speak.

Jesus sat down to begin teaching, and was immediately approached by scribes and Pharisees who made the hapless woman stand on display in the middle of the temple area. Perkins refers to this garish trap as a "biological apophthegm" set up by Jesus' opponents, that he could only escape through a "wise saying or action" (Perkins 1990, 965).⁴ "They said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?'" (John 8:4-5).⁵ Initially Jesus says nothing, contenting himself to write in the sand with his finger.⁶ "The one whose words have flowed so freely across these chapters now refuses to speak" (Brown and Maloney 2017, 234). Finally after their repeated inquiry, he deigns to respond: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). Vastly surpassing Moses the

manuscripts include the passage after Luke 21:36, and many scholars suggest the tone and language is more typical of Luke than John" (Brown and Maloney 2017, 233). Nonetheless, we can see Jesus' withdrawal to the Mount of Olives as foreshadowing a significant moment in salvation history, where, as articulated in the first footnote, the law would be mercifully applied and forgiveness granted rather than condemnation. Also see John 8:15 and 8:46 in the previous footnote.

⁴ Another biological apophthegm is found in Mark 12:13-17 regarding the tribute coin (cf. Perkins 1990, 965). John 7:14-16 looms in the background of their suspicious desire to test him: "About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. The Jews were astonished at it, saying, 'How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?' Then Jesus answered them, 'My teaching is not mine but his who sent me.'"

⁵ According to Maloney, the scribes and Pharisees did not really care about the "fate of the woman or the injured husband who is never mentioned, but in the possibility of finding fault with Jesus" (Maloney 1998, 261). She is merely a prop who is "being instrumentalized" (Maloney 1998, 261) so that the scribes and Pharisees "might have some charge to bring against him" (John 8:6). Such unflattering cynicism in the text underlines a context of growing suspicion and separation between Christianity and Judaism at the time this pericope was written.

⁶ "There is no clear indication of why Jesus wrote on the ground. Patristic authors suggested (Jeremiah) 17:13, 'those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord,' as the text that governed Jesus' action. If so, it is an indirect reminder of the 'guilt' of those who are condemning the woman" (Perkins 1990, 965). This idea also underscores Jesus' divine knowledge and formation in scripture. The fact that his opponents continued badgering him to respond indicates their utter failure to discern what Jesus' silence and writing was pointing out about their presence at the temple under such circumstances in the first place. In their zeal for the law they have subjugated someone to a cruel and humiliating fate. They have done this merely to prove a point. In doing so they have missed the point of having a law, even to the extent that they forsook the Lord who gave the law in the first place.

lawgiver, the Word himself spoke from the silence with all the authority of God. His opponents were not asking the right questions, and had forgotten that the law is meant to be a delight,⁷ not a literal stone with which to bash people.

Jesus' inadvertent opponents of the law depart,⁸ leaving him to write in the sand before straightening up to face the woman in front of him. "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (John 8:10) For the first time in the pericope, "the woman becomes an active character, drawn into the action by a question from Jesus who does not condemn but gives life" (Maloney 1998, 260). An object no longer, but someone who can enter into a personal relationship with Jesus, the woman addresses him as "'Lord' (*kyrie*), displaying her reverence for him" (Maloney 1998, 262). On the basis of this newly founded relationship, "Jesus can challenge her to sin no more," and she has entered into a new life where God himself has established her in right relationship with him (Maloney 1998, 262).⁹

Both in his dealings with the scribes and Pharisees and with the woman, Jesus has clearly used his divine authority throughout the pericope. Yet while an air of forgiveness permeates his encounter with the woman, there is much more to it than that. In treating her like a human being

⁷ "I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight" (Psalm 119:174).

⁸ Not one of them claimed sinlessness, and "their departure in order of seniority is a chain reaction in which the exit of the most significant Jewish leader leads to departure of the next in line until all have disappeared. One can only speculate about the historical possibilities of such an order of events (cf. Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 2:167), but the gradual disappearance of the accusers, who have now become the accused," is a pronounced way of leaving Jesus and the woman by themselves (Maloney 1998, 261). As in the second footnote with John 8:15, "I pass judgment on no one" (cf. Perkins 1990, 965), while Jesus does not explicitly judge his opponents, he has placed them in a position where they have passed a *de facto* judgment on themselves. This is a divine activity, where in the presence of God we are simply revealed as we are. Again from the second footnote, the question in John 8:46 looms in the background: "Can anyone convict me of sin" (cf. Perkins 1990, 965). Applied to the woman in front of him, Jesus' response is negative. "As Augustine states it: 'Only two remain, the wretched woman and the incarnation of mercy' (*In Iohannis Evangelium* 33:5; CCSL XXXVI, 309: *Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia*)" (Maloney 1998, 261).

⁹ This paragraph recalls the proximate context of Nicodemus in John 3:3 as mentioned in the first footnote re: being "born from above." Maloney also points out three issues that closely associate this narrative with the life of Jesus. First, "the punishment for adultery was discussed" in his time "(cf. Mark 10:2, 12:15; Matt 22:35; Luke 10:25. For the discussion, cf. Blank, 'Frauen' 86); second, Jesus opposes the traditional defenders of the Mosaic tradition; and third, on his own authority he unconditionally forgives a sinner" (Maloney 1998, 262).

with moral agency, “he asserts her autonomy as one who will make her own decisions and have her own relationship with God” (Brown and Maloney 2017, 235). Such is the case with every sinner who transcends objectification to become a beloved subject of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reference List

- Brown, Sherri. and Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B. 2017. *Interpreting the Gospel and Letters of John: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Harrington, S.J., Daniel J., ed. 1998. *Sacra Pagina Series*. Vol. 4. *The Gospel of John*. Translation and commentary by Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press.
- Perkins, Pheme. 1990. "The Gospel According to John." In *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. and Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm. 942-985. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.