The Abusive Religious Leaders of John 8: How a Misnamed Story Can Help Religious Institutions Deal with Sexual Assault

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This article focuses on John 7:53–8:11, the narrative commonly called The Adulterous Woman, The Story/Pericope of the Adulterous Woman, or the Pericope Adulterae. I consider this story from the point of view of the sole female character. I cannot help but think also of the epidemic of sexual assault that has been slowly coming to light at universities and workplaces as well as among religious and political leaders. It has always been here, but women and allies have only recently begun to gain national and international attention. This epidemic is not about a particular individual or institution; it is about the sexual abuse women have undergone, often lawfully and in silence, over the centuries. These adjustments to the typical perspective will call into question certain interpretive assumptions often brought to this narrative. This article renames and reframes the narrative—the Story of the Abusive Religious Leaders—through the embodied perspective of the woman, who herself can fairly be called a survivor of sexual abuse.

**Modern Scholarship’s Disregard for the Passage**

It is surprisingly rare for a commentary to give substantial treatment to this story. Few scholars see the need to engage the story beyond explaining that it is not original to the Gospel of John. An example is Ernst Haenchen, who translates the passage, says it is not original, and then does not attempt any analysis. More striking is Rudolf Bultmann who, in his groundbreaking commentary on the Gospel of John, does not even include a dismissal of the passage, but instead proceeds as if it does not exist. Others, such as Leon Morris, state that it is impossible to believe this story is authentic to John. He relegates his commentary on 7:53–8:11 to an appendix; yet, unlike many of his counterparts, he offers commentary on it. Similarly, Francis Moloney and D. A. Carson do not include it as part of John but include an excursus on the passage.

George Beasley-Murray is one of the few to include commentary on the passage other than in an appendix or excursus, despite his confidence it is not original. He does, however, believe it to be a historical account. Similarly, Morris argues that, while the passage is not original to John, the story is true to the character of Jesus.

Though some scholars maintain it is an ancient oral tradition that can be traced to the NT era, these proponents of the story’s antiquity still deal with it independently of the Gospel in which it is embedded, most often in an excursus or appendix. Thus the history, rather than the content, of the passage is the focus.

**The Passage in its Context**

The story focuses on the sinful men, not the sinful woman. The surrounding narratives chosen for the placement of the text bolster this argument that the sin of the religious leaders is the crux of the passage. Gail O’Day and Susan Hylen also argue that it is easy to understand why this story was placed at this point in John. The question regarding who has authority to interpret the law (ch. 7) as well as the topics of sin, freedom from sin, and testing (ch. 8) all come together in Jesus’s interaction with the characters. The story meshes with themes from the surrounding chapters. The repeated themes and language of sin, judgment, and the right to judge or forgive are interwoven with the passage. These refrains make a perfect setting for a demonstration of what Jesus is teaching and how the authorities are failing to understand the light Jesus has brought into the world.

The reader first meets this woman when the sinful men burst onto the scene. They are dragging a woman and forcing her to stand in front of a crowd—shamed, disgraced, and perhaps partially dressed. There is absolutely no explanation of details such as who caught this woman, how she was seized, or where the other guilty party is. The authorities are vague on how they came by this woman; they bring no witnesses, and they only arrest one of the guilty parties. They are clearly not interested in justice. In fact, they are violating the law by failing to bring forth witnesses and her guilty partner. The surrounding narrative makes clear that the ones who are supposed to be the experts in the law of Moses fail in their understanding. For the abusers, the law is a weapon to gain power over opponents. The trap is set, and the woman is nothing more than bait.

The wording suggests the woman was apprehended while engaging in sex, for the religious authorities explain that she was “apprehended in the act of adultery.” Morris notes that the witnesses must have seen the act, as opposed to obtaining hearsay or stumbling upon a compromising circumstance, in order for their testimony to be valid. However, no one in the scene ever specifies the identity of a witness, let alone the two or three required by law. No male partner is brought before Jesus and accused of adultery.

Deuteronomy 22:20–29 defines adultery as sex between a man (married or unmarried) and a woman who is married or engaged. While stoning is not explicitly mentioned as the method of execution for adultery, in Deut 22:21 the punishment for a young woman who is given in marriage under the guise of being a virgin is stoning. Thus, it may have become the method of the death penalty for other sexually-oriented cases. In this section on sexual relations and punishments in Deuteronomy, the only scenario where the man is not also put to death is when he rapes a virgin who is not engaged to be married. It is unclear, therefore, why the man is not also brought before Jesus and accused. Morris argues that his absence indicates there was a trap set for the woman; he was allowed to go free once they had an offender to take to Jesus. Thus, the lone woman is brought into their midst to bear humiliation and capital punishment by stoning.

Commentators and readers have attempted to explain why the woman’s counterpart is not present, how the religious
authorities captured her, whether the timing seems suspicious, and many more questions. Examples of these theories are numerous. Perhaps the Pharisees asked a man to seduce a woman and he was allowed to sneak away in the ensuing chaos. Perhaps the woman and man were in a relationship and the man betrayed her for a price. Perhaps she was deceived or coerced into the situation. No such scenario is legal, much less just.14 In fact, all the proposed scenarios above would, by our standards, amount to sexual abuse. The authorities are not seeking justice; they are abusing the law and bending it to their desires. They do not seek a trial, but mob “justice.”

Instead of answering the religious leaders, Jesus does something unexpected: he bends down and begins writing or drawing on the ground (the verb katagraphō can mean to write or to draw).15 What Jesus wrote or drew does not play a role in this story; the act itself is more important. Jesus completely ignores the abusers and refuses to acknowledge their deceptive question. Jesus disregards their demands and, in a creative act of resistance, robs the religious leaders of both their power and their prey. Jesus refuses to engage their legal argument when a woman’s life is at stake. The religious authorities badger Jesus to answer them while the woman wonders how long until the stoning begins. Finally, Jesus stands up and answers the scribes and Pharisees.

After Jesus rises, he responds: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (v. 7b NRSV). Jesus’s prerequisite is that only a sinless person may throw the first stone. The word anamartētos (“sinless”) occurs nowhere else in the NT. Moloney and Carson believe Jesus is referring to sexual sin and the likelihood that certain of the men present had engaged in sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage.16

Whatever the specific connotations of anamartētos, neither her accusers nor anyone in the crowd can fulfill this stipulation that Jesus adds.17 Jesus demonstrates to the crowd that no one there has the right to judge her, leaving all in attendance speechless.18 Roles are reversed between Jesus and his opponents. He becomes the questioner, and the religious authorities become the objects of their own question. He calls the religious authorities to accountability for twisting the law to their own ends and for the exploitation of this woman.19 This is the heart of the story—Jesus calls the religious men to account for their sins.

Jesus bends down a second time and continues to write or draw on the ground. His action gives time for the scribes and Pharisees to reflect on whether they measure up to the same code they are using against the adulteress. Their silence and withholding answers Jesus’s question quite clearly—they are all guilty of sin, some perhaps even of adultery. Therefore, they are each guilty of abusing this woman.

After every Pharisee, scribe, and onlooker has shamefully deserted the scene, Jesus turns and addresses the maltreated woman. Augustine describes the final scene beautifully: “Only two remain, the wretched woman and the incarnation of mercy.”20 This is the first time she is addressed by anyone in the story! For the entire scene, she has been a passive victim of her surroundings, but she becomes an active character when Jesus speaks to her. He rhetorically asks, “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She replies, “No one, sir.” Jesus answers her with one of the most memorable lines in all of Scripture: “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”21 As the only one without sin, Jesus is the only one who has the right to judge or withhold judgment.

**Today’s Abuses**

Sadly, the abuse of women has continued throughout history. Just as here in John 8, manipulation and abuse of women continues today, often by religious authorities. In service of this article’s subtitle, “How a Misnamed Story Can Help Religious Institutions Deal with Sexual Assault,” I offer four guidelines.

**Abuse is Pervasive**

First, be aware of the pervasiveness of abuse. Dragging the woman of John 8 from bed and making her a public spectacle in an effort to gain power was and is abusive. Yet almost no one over the course of Christian history has recognized it as such! Such an oversight should remind us to open our eyes to the pervasiveness of abuse.

- Someone is assaulted every two minutes in the United States.22
- One in six women in the United States experiences sexual assault.
- One in three women in the United States experiences sexual violence (numbers are higher for multiracial and American Indian women).
- Nine out of ten survivors of sexual assault are female.
- Three out of four rapes are committed by a friend, acquaintance, or significant other.
- College age (18–24) is the most likely time a person will be raped. It is three to four times higher than any other time in a woman’s life.

Concerning this age group (18–24):

- Only twenty percent of young women report their rape to the police.
- The first three months of her freshman year of college is the most likely time a woman will be raped.
- Only six of every 1,000 perpetrators will go to prison.
- Schools often administer little to no punishment for people they find guilty of assaulting a fellow student.
- Survivors sometimes endure terrible ordeals when they do speak up, often to no avail.

Such statistics reveal the certainty that these women are in the schools, churches, and organizations where readers of *Priscilla Papers* serve. They are in our pews and pulpits; they are our students and teachers.

**Survivors are Often Silent**

Second, notice that the abused woman of John 8 is silent until Jesus invites her to speak. Similarly, many survivors of abuse today may never reveal the anguish they have lived through. It is imperative that we do not mistake their silence for actual absence of abuse. Many institutions are discovering this the hard way. In light of all the evidence, it is safer to assume it is happening.
urge you to challenge statements made by authorities who claim they had no idea abuse was happening. It was, and is, and will continue to happen until someone stops it.

Casting Blame

Third, do not blame the survivor. That the woman of John 8 was a sinner does not disqualify her from justice. Nor does it justify her abuse. No matter what a woman or man is doing, even if it is deemed unwise or sinful, abuse is never excusable. This is an absolute truth illustrated in the Story of the Abusive Religious Leaders. No person—female or male, adult or child—is ever at fault for abuse she or he suffers. This remains true if a person has been drinking alcohol, is sexually active, is out late at night, or is wearing revealing clothing. Abuse is never what a survivor deserves. Unfortunately, too many investigations of abuse, including many by religious organizations, seem to suggest otherwise.

Avoid Labels

Finally, avoid damaging labels. As mentioned earlier, interpreters have labeled this woman and story inappropriately. While Shakespeare might wonder, "what's in a name," most of us know from first-hand experience that a name holds a great deal of power. Rarely does the name a group of men assigns to a woman, such as "The Adulterous Woman," fall harmlessly by the wayside. Quite the opposite, it changes the way people perceive her, treat her, and how she feels about herself. A name has the power to change, even to destroy, a person.

A Misnamed Story

The very title, "The Adulterous Woman," assumes that this story focuses on a woman and her sin. In contrast, this article argues that the focus is on a group of sinful, male, religious leaders who use their privilege to try to kill a woman to solidify their power. Jesus is at odds with the religious authorities, and they are seeking to stop him from gathering any more power or followers. His enemies are concerned about authority—specifically, who has the authority to judge. These enemies, the scribes and Pharisees, seek to trap Jesus using his own assertion that he has such authority.23 In the process, a woman caught committing adultery becomes the pawn used to bait the trap for Jesus.

The power of who gets to name is often one-sided and too often in the hands of the privileged. For instance, although it is difficult to determine when this passage received the title "the adulterous woman," the title dates at least to the fourth century and is used in ancient records almost entirely by men. The church has continued to pass down that title generation after generation. A survey of twenty recent Bible translations reveals that, besides those in which no titles are given to stories, only a handful have any different title than "The Adulterous Woman" or "The Woman Caught in Adultery."24 Yet the nameless woman in the story could just as easily be described as abused, used, trapped, or forgiven.

Possible titles for the story include "The Sinful Men," "The Abusive Leaders," "The Hypocritical Religious Scholars," or as in the title of this article, "The Abusive Religious Leaders." Just as those with power try to control the woman in this text, those with power control the re-telling of this story. While Jesus deconstructs the power dynamics in the story, in the re-telling of this story we have allowed them to persist. Like Christ, we must stand up against those who would use women for their personal gain.

O’Day, in the most recent edition of The Women’s Bible Commentary, comments on a striking feature of this story: "Jesus treats the woman as the social and human equal of the scribes and Pharisees. . . . When the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman . . . to Jesus, they dehumanized her, turning her into an object for debate and discussion. Interpretations . . . that focus exclusively on the woman, and on her sexual behavior as sin, continue to dehumanize and objectify her."25 Thus, to read this story as "the story of the adulterous woman" is to stand in the trajectory of the abusive leaders rather than that of Christ.

Conclusion

Like Jesus in the story of the Abusive Religious Leaders, we must break the snares that trap so many people. We must create safe spaces to share, we must raise awareness of the issue, we must insist that abuse survivors have nothing to be ashamed of, and we must work to stop this type of behavior in our communities. We must respond to the survivor like Jesus did—with the chance of new life. This idea lies at the very heart of Christianity!

Notes

1. The passage’s canonical status is not the topic of this article. For a summary of the passage’s doubtful originality to John, see Bruce Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, 2nd ed. (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994) 187–89.
8. Many scholars argue that the story fits awkwardly with its surroundings and was haphazardly placed in its current location. Morris, John, 46–49; Bultmann, John, viii–ix, and Moloney, John, 259, for instance, see it as an interruption, while Beasley-Murray, John, 144, and O’Day and Hylen, John, 89, argue that it was well-placed in its surrounding context.
9. Moloney, John, 260, adds the reasonable narrative flourish that she was probably half-clad and frenzied over momentarily facing death from her captors.
10. O’Day and Hylen, John, 89.
11. Morris, John, 780; Moloney, John, 260.
12. Morris, John, 782, notes that the scribes and Pharisees manipulate the OT text. They use the feminine word for “such” are to be stoned, when in actuality Deut 22:22 and Lev 20:10 state that both the man and woman are to be put to death.
17. Lev 24:1–16 and Deut 13:10, 17:2–7 state that the witnesses should throw the first stone. There is no indication that the charges brought by the scribes and Pharisees are false, but none of the witnesses pick up a stone. They might be too preoccupied with Jesus’s additional requirement, or there may be a problem with their testimony as witnesses. The witnesses, however, are not identified in the story. Moloney, John, 264, believes that there are no genuine witnesses present; for this reason, no one can throw the first stone.
18. O’Day and Hylen, John, 89, add that Jesus’s answer enacts what he said in 7:24, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (NRSV).
19. O’Day and Hylen, John, 89.
21. O’Day and Hylen, John, 89, point out the similarity of Jesus’s words to the paralytic in 5:14b, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you” (NRSV).
22. All statistics are from RAINN.org (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network).
23. O’Day and Hylen, John, 89, focus on the problematic way Jesus’s opponents interpret the law in ch. 7 and how that plays out in the dramatic confrontation in 8:1–11. Ch. 8 continues the issue of correct judgment, and the story provides a perfect example of Jesus’s ability to judge correctly.
24. The CEB, MSG, and NKJV each use a title that does not focus on the woman. The NTE settles in the middle with the title, “Adultery and Hypocrisy.” Most major translations keep the “classic” title: ESV, GNT, ICB, NASB, NCV, NLT, NRSV, and RSV. The NIV usually has headings but does not for this story and instead notes that this is inauthentic to John. The KJV, AKJV, and TLB do not include headings in general.