

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
8:1-11

1. Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2. And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came to him; and he sat down and taught them. 3. And the Scribes and Pharisees brought to him a woman taken in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, 4. they said to him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. 5. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do you say? 6. This they said, tempting him, that they might have *something* of which to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with *his* finger, *as though he did not hear*. 7. So when they continued asking him, he raised himself up and said to them, He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. 8. And again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9. And those who heard *it*, being convicted by *their own* conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the eldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. 10. When Jesus had raised himself up and saw no one but the woman, he said to her, Woman, where are your accusers? Has no man condemned you? 11. She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said to her, Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.

These eleven verses, together with the last verse of the preceding chapter, form perhaps the gravest critical difficulty in the New Testament. Their genuineness is disputed. It is held by many learned Christian writers--who have an undoubted right to be heard on such matters--that the passage was not written by St. John, that it was written by an uninspired hand and probably at a later day, and that it has no lawful claim to be regarded as a part of canonical Scripture. It is held by others--whose opinions, to say the least, are equally entitled to respect--that the passage is a genuine part of St. John's Gospel, and that the arguments against it, however weighty they may appear, are insufficient and admit of an answer. A summary of the whole case is all that I shall attempt to give.

In the list of those who think the passage either not genuine or at least *doubtful*, are the following names: Beza, Grotius, Baxter, Hammond, A. Clarke, Tittman, Tholuck, Olshausen, Hengstenberg, Tregelles, Alford, Wordsworth, Scrivener.

In the list of those who think the passage *genuine*, are the following names: Augustine, Ambrose, Euthymius, Rupertus, Zwingle, Calvin, Melancthon, Ecolampadius, Brentius, Bucer, Gualter, Musculus, Bullinger, Pellican, Flacius, Diodati, Chemnitius, Aretius, Piscator, Calovius, Cocceius, Toletus, Maldonatus, á Lapide, Ferus, Nifanius, Cartwright, Mayer, Trapp, Poole, Lampe, Whitby, Leigh, Doddridge, Bengel, Stier, Webster, Burgon.

Calvin is sometimes named as one of those who think the passage before us not genuine. But his language about it in his Commentary is certainly not

enough to bear out the assertion. He says, "It is plain that this passage was unknown anciently to the Greek Churches; and some conjecture that it has been brought from some other place and inserted here. But as it has always been received by the Latin Churches and is found in many old Greek manuscripts and contains nothing unworthy of an Apostle, there is no reason why we should refuse to apply it to our advantage."

[A.] The arguments against the passage are as follows:

(1) That it is not found in some of the oldest and best manuscripts, now existing, of the Greek Testament.

(2) That it is not found in some of the earlier versions or translations of the Scriptures.

(3) That it is not commented on by the Greek Fathers, Origen, Cyril, Chrysostom, and Theophylact in their expositions of St. John, nor quoted or referred to by Tertullian and Cyprian.

(4) That it differs in style from the rest of St. John's Gospel and contains several words and forms of expression which are nowhere else used in his writings.

(5) That the moral tendency of the passage is somewhat doubtful, and that it seems to represent our Lord as palliating a heinous sin.

[B.] The arguments in favor of the passage are as follows:

(1) That it is found in many old manuscripts, if not in the very oldest and best.

(2) That it is found in the Vulgate Latin, and in the Arabic, Coptic, Persian, and Ethiopian versions.

(3) That it is commented on by Augustine in his exposition of this Gospel, while in another of his writings he expressly refers to and explains its omission from some manuscripts; that it is quoted and defended by Ambrose, referred to by Jerome, and treated as genuine in the Apostolical constitutions.

(4) That there is no proof whatever that there is any immoral tendency in the passage. Our Lord pronounced no opinion on the sin of adultery but simply declined the office of a judge.

It may seem almost presumptuous to offer any opinion on this very difficult subject. But I venture to make the following remarks and to invite the reader's candid attention to them. I lean decidedly to the side of those who think the passage is genuine, for the following reasons:

1. The argument from manuscripts appears to me inconclusive. We possess comparatively few very ancient ones. Even of them some favor the genuineness of the passage. The same remark applies to the ancient versions. Testimony of this kind, to be conclusive, should be unanimous.

2. The argument from the Fathers seems to me more in favor of the passage than against it. On the one side, the reasons are simply *negative*. Certain Fathers say nothing about the passage but at the same time say nothing against it. On the other side, the reasons are *positive*. Men of such high authority as Augustine and Ambrose not only comment on the passage but defend its genuineness, and assign reasons for its omission by some mistaken transcribers.

Let me add to this that the negative evidence of the Fathers who are against the passage is not nearly so weighty as it appears at first sight. Cyril of Alexandria is one. But his commentary on the eighth chapter of John is lost, and what we have was supplied by the modern hand of Jodocus Clichtovæus, a Persian doctor, who lived in the year 1510 A.D. (See Dupin's Eccles. hist.) Chrysostom's commentary on John consists of popular public homilies, in which we can easily imagine that such a passage as this might possibly be omitted. Theophylact was notoriously a copier and imitator of Chrysostom. Origen, the only remaining commentator, is one whose testimony is not of first-rate value, and he has omitted many things in his exposition of St. John. The silence of Tertullian and Cyprian is perhaps accountable on the same principles by which Augustine explains the omission of the passage in some copies of this Gospel in his own time.

Some, as Calovius, Maldonatus, Flacius, Aretius, and Piscator, think that Chrysostom distinctly refers to this passage in his Sixtieth Homily on John, though he passes it over in exposition.

3. The argument from alleged discrepancies between the style and language of this passage and the usual style of St. John's writing is one which should be received with much caution. We are not dealing with an uninspired but with an inspired writer. Surely it is not too much to say that an inspired writer may occasionally use words and constructions and modes of expression which he generally does not use, and that it is no proof that he did not write a passage because he wrote it in a peculiar way.

I leave the subject here. In cases of doubt like this, it is wise to be on the safe side. On the whole I think it safest to regard this disputed passage as genuine. At any rate, I prefer the difficulties on this side to those on the other.

The whole discussion may leave in our minds, at any rate, one comfortable thought. If even in the case of this notoriously disputed passage (more controverted and doubted than any in the New Testament) so much can be said in its favor, how immensely strong is the foundation on which the whole volume of Scripture rests! If even against this passage the arguments of opponents are not conclusive, we have no reason to fear for the rest of the Bible.

After all, there is much ground for thinking that some critical difficulties have been *purposely* left by God's providence in the text of the New Testament in order to prove the faith and patience of Christian people. They serve to test the humility of those to whom intellectual difficulties are a far greater cross than either doctrinal or practical

ones. To such minds it is trying, but useful, discipline to find occasional passages involving knots which they cannot quite untie and problems which they cannot quite solve. Of such passages the verses before us are a striking instance. That the text of them is "a hard thing" it would be wrong to deny. But I believe our duty is not to reject it hastily, but to sit still and wait. In these matters, "he who believes shall not make haste."

The following passage from Augustine (De conjug. Adult.) is worth notice. Having argued that it well becomes a Christian husband to be reconciled to his wife upon her repentance after adultery (because our Lord said "Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more"), he says: "This, however, rather shocks the minds of some weak believers--or rather unbelievers and enemies of the Christian faith--insomuch that, afraid of its giving their wives impunity of sinning, they struck out of their copies of the Gospel this that our Lord did in pardoning the woman taken in adultery; as if He granted leave of sinning when He said, "Go, and sin no more." Augustine, be it remembered, lived about 400 A.D.

Those who wish to look further into the subject of this disputed passage will find it fully discussed by Gomasus, Bloomfield, and Wordsworth.

1.--[*Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.*] The division of the chapter in this place is to be regretted. The last verse of the preceding chapter and the verse before us are evidently intended to be taken together. While the Pharisees and members of the Council "went every man to his own house," our Lord, having no home of His own, retired "to the Mount of Olives" and there spent the night in the open air. In such a climate as that of Judea, there was nothing remarkable in His doing this. The garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the mount, would supply sufficient shelter. That this was our Lord's habitual practice, we are distinctly told in Luke xxi.37.

Lampe remarks that we never read of our Lord lodging, sleeping, or tarrying a night in Jerusalem.

2.--[*And early in the morning.*] This expression is worth noticing because, according to some, it explains our Lord's subsequent use of the figure "I am the light of the world." They think that it refers to the break of day, or rising of the sun.

[*He came again into the temple.*] This means the outer courts of the temple where it was customary for the Jews to assemble and listen to teachers of religion. In eastern countries and in the times when there was no printing, it must be remembered, much instruction was given in this way, by open air addresses or conversations. Thus Socrates taught at Athens.

[*All the people came to Him.*] "All" here must mean great multitudes of the people. After all that had happened in the last three or four days, we may easily understand that our Lord's appearance would at once attract a crowd. His fame as a teacher and speaker was established.

[*He sat down and taught.*] That it was common for the teachers to sit and the hearers to stand is evident from other texts. "I sat daily with you

teaching in the temple." (Matt. xxvi.55.) In the synagogues of Nazareth, when our Lord began to preach He first "gave the book to the minister and sat down." (Luke iv.20.) "He sat down and taught the people out of the ship." (Luke v.3.) "We sat down and spoke to the women." (Acts xvi.13.)

3.--[*The Scribes and Pharisees.*] This is the only place in St. John's Gospel where He mentions the "Scribes" at all. He names the Pharisees twenty times (sixteen times alone and four times in conjunction with the chief priests).

This fact is thought by some to be an argument against the genuineness of the passage, but without just cause. St. Mark, in his Gospel, speaks twelve times of the Pharisees and only twice mentions the Scribes in conjunction with them. Moreover, this is the only occasion recorded in St. John when a formal attempt was made to entrap our Lord by a subtle question. That being so, there may be a good reason why the Scribes should be mentioned as well as the Pharisees as principal agents in the attempt.

[*Brought...woman...adultery.*] It seems not improbable that this attempt to ensnare our Lord was one result of His enemies' failure to apprehend Him during the feast. Defeated in their effort to meet Him in argument, or to apprehend Him in the absence of any legal charge, they tried next to entrap Him into committing Himself in some way and so giving them a handle against Him. No times was to be lost. They had failed yesterday, and found their own officers unwilling to apprehend our Lord. They resolved to try another plan today. They would ensnare our Lord into doing something illegal or indiscreet and then get an advantage over Him.

[*Set her in the midst.*] This means in the middle of a ring or circle composed of themselves and their followers, our Lord and His disciples, and the crowd listening to His teaching.

4.--[*They said...woman was taken in adultery, etc.*] It throws some light on this charge to remember what immense crowds came up to Jerusalem at the great public feasts, and especially at the feast of tabernacles. At such a season, when every house was crowded as at a fair time, when many consequently slept in the open air and no small disorder probably ensued, we can well understand that such a sin as a breach of the seventh commandment would be very likely to be committed.

5.--[*Now Moses...commanded...stoned.*] This is the legitimate conclusion of the two texts, Lev. xx.10 and Deut. xxii.22, when compared. There seems no ground for the comment of some writers that Moses did not command an adulteress to be put to death by stoning.

It is worth notice that the expression "Moses in the law" is not used either by Matthew, Mark, or Luke. But it is used by St. John both here and at chapter i.45.

[*But what do you say?*] This would be more literally rendered, "Therefore what do you say?" The Greek word rendered "but" by our translators is hardly ever so rendered in the New Testament, and in most places is either "therefore," "then," "so," "now," or "and." John ix.18 and Acts xxv.4 are

the only parallel cases.

Ecolampadius thinks the Pharisees were especially sore and irritated because our Lord had said that "publicans and harlots" would enter the kingdom of God before Pharisees. (Matt. xxi.31.)

6.--[*This they said tempting...accuse Him.*] In what did this temptation consist? How did the Jews hope to find ground for an accusation? The answer seems easy. If our Lord replied that the woman ought NOT to be stoned, they would have denounced Him to the people as one that poured contempt on the law. If our Lord, on the contrary, replied that the woman *ought* to be stoned, they would have accused Him to the Romans as one who usurped the prerogative of putting criminals to death. See John xviii.31: "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." Moreover, they would have published everywhere our Lord's inconsistency in offering salvation to publicans and harlots and yet condemning to death an adulteress for one transgression.

Let it be noticed that subtle ensnaring questions like these--putting the person questioned into an apparent dilemma or difficulty, whatever answer he might give--seem to have been favorite weapons of the Jews. The Pharisees' question about "tribute money," the lawyer's question about "the great commandment of the law," and the Sadducees' question about "the resurrection," are parallel cases. The question before us is therefore quite in keeping with other places in the Gospels.

Augustine remarks: "They said in themselves, 'Let us put before Him a woman caught in adultery. Let us ask what is ordered in the law concerning her. If He shall say stone her, He will not have the repute of gentleness. If He gives sentence to let her go, He will not keep righteousness.'" Euthymius says the same.

[*But Jesus stooped down, etc.*] Our Lord's intention in this remarkable sentence can hardly admit of doubt. He declined to answer the subtle question put to Him, partly because He knew the malicious motives of the questioners, partly because He had always announced that He did not come to be "a judge and divider" among men or to interfere in the slightest degree with the administration of the law. His silence was equivalent to a refusal to answer.

But the peculiar action that our Lord employed in "writing with His finger on the ground" is undeniably a difficulty. St. John gives no explanation of the action, and we are left to conjecture both *why* our Lord wrote and *what* He wrote.

(1) Some think, as Bede, Rupertus, and Lampe, that our Lord wrote on the ground the texts of Scripture which settled the question brought before Him, as the seventh commandment, and Lev. xx.10 and Duet. xxii.22. The action would then imply, "Why do ye ask Me? What is written in the law, that law which God wrote with His own finger as I am writing now?"

(2) Some think, as Lightfoot and Burgon, that our Lord meant to refer to the law of Moses for the trial of jealousy, in which an accused woman was

obliged to drink water into which dust from the floor of the tabernacle or temple had been put by the priest. (Num. v.17.) The action would then imply, "Has the law for trying such a one as this been tried? Look at the dust on which I am writing. Has the woman been placed before the priest and drunk of the dust and water?"

(3) Some think, as Augustine, Melancthon, Brentius, Toletus, and á Lapide, that our Lord's action was a silent reference to the text Jer. xvii.13: "They that depart from Me shall be written in the earth."

(4) One rationalist writer suggests that our Lord "stooped down" from feelings of modesty, as if ashamed of the sight before Him and of the story told to Him. The idea is preposterous and entirely out of harmony with our Lord's public demeanor.

(5) Some think, as Euthymius, Calvin, Rollock, Chemnitius, Diodati, Flavius, Piscator, Grotius, Poole, and Hutcheson, that our Lord did not mean anything at all by this writing on the ground, and that He only signified that He would give no answer and would neither listen to nor interfere in such matters as the one brought before Him.

Calvin remarks: "Christ intended, by doing nothing, to show how unworthy they were of being heard; just as if anyone, while another was speaking to him, were to draw lines on the wall or to turn his back or to show by any other sign that He was not attending to what was said."

I must leave the reader to choose which solution he prefers. To my eyes, I confess, there are difficulties in each view. If I must select one, I prefer the last of the five as the simplest.

Quesnell remarks: "We never read that Jesus Christ *wrote* but once in his life. Let men learn from hence never to write but when it is necessary or useful, and to do it with humility and modesty, on a principle of charity and not of malice."

7.--[*So when they continued...said to them.*] The Scribes and Pharisees seem to have been determined to have an answer, and to have made it necessary for our Lord to speak at last. But His first silence and significant refusal to attend were a plain proof to all around that He did not wish to interfere with the office of the magistrate and had not come to be a judge of offenses against the law. If they got an opinion from Him about this case, they could not say that He gave it willingly but that it was extorted from Him by much importunity.

[*He who is without sin...stone at her.*] This solemn and weighty sentence is a striking example of our Lord's perfect wisdom. He referred His questioners to Scripture-- Deut. xvii.7 says, "The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death." It sent their minds home to their own private lives. "Whatever the woman may deserve, are you the people to find fault with her?" It neither condemned nor justified the adulteress and yet showed our Lord's reverence for the law of Moses. "I decline to pronounce sentence on this woman because I am not the judge. You know yourselves what the law is in such cases as well as I do. You

have no right to assume that I do not reverence the law as much as yourselves. But since you profess to honor the law of Moses so much, I remind you that this same law requires the witnesses to be the executioners. Now are you the persons who ought to punish this woman, however guilty she may be? Do you yourselves come before Me with clear consciences about the seventh commandment?"

Many think that when our Lord said, "He that is without sin," He meant the expression to be taken in a general sense. I cannot hold this view. It would involve the awkward conclusion that no one could be a judge at all or punish a criminal, because no one is altogether and absolutely "without sin." I am decidedly of the opinion that our Lord referred to sin against the seventh commandment. There is too much reason to think that such sin was very common among the Jews in our Lord's time. The expression "an adulterous generation" (Matt. xii.39; xvi.4; and Mark viii.38) is full of meaning. (See also Rom. ii.22, Luke xviii.11, and James iv.4.)

[*And again He stooped down, etc.*] This repeated act would greatly add to the weighty solemnity of the sentence which had just fallen from our Lord's lips. "I have given my opinion; now what are you going to do? I wait for your reply."

9.--[*And those who heard...conscience.*] This sentence seems to me to confirm the opinion that when our Lord said "He who is without sin," He referred to sin against the seventh commandment. A general charge would hardly have produced the effect here described. A charge of breaking the seventh commandment would be just such a one as a man would shrink from, if made publicly. The sin is peculiarly one which brings with it afterwards a certain sense of shame. It is commonly a deed of darkness and one in secret, and the doer of it dreads the light.

The power of conscience stands out here in a very striking manner. It is a part of man's inward nature which is far too little remembered by ministers and teachers. Fallen and corrupt as man is, we must never forget that God has left him a certain sense of right and wrong, called conscience. It has no power to save or convert or lead to Christ. But it has a power to accuse and prick and witness. Such texts as Rom. ii.15 and 2 Cor. iv.2 should be carefully considered.

[*Went out one by one, etc.*] The words "eldest" and "last" in this sentence are in the plural number, which does not appear in the English version. The oldest would probably have the greatest number of sins on their minds.

[*Jesus was left alone, and the woman, etc.*] This must, of course, mean that the Scribes and Pharisees who accused the woman were all gone away. It does not necessarily follow that the crowd of hearers who were about our Lord when the case was brought to Him had gone away. They must have stood by and seen and heard all that passed.

10.--[*When Jesus had raised Himself up, etc.*] How long the pause must have been during which our Lord stooped down and wrote on the ground a second time, we are not told. But it must probably have been several minutes. When it says that our Lord "saw none but the woman," it must mean "none of

the party who came and interrupted His teaching, except the woman." The accusers had disappeared, and the accused alone remained.

The question that our Lord put to the woman must have been for the satisfaction of the crowd around. Let them mark, from the question and answer, that the case had fallen to the ground. No evidence was offered. No accuser appeared. No sentence therefore could be pronounced, and none was needed.

11.--[*She said, No man, Lord.*] We may observe here that our Lord, with merciful consideration, did not ask the woman whether she was guilty or not. Thus she could with truth reply to His question and yet not incriminate herself.

[*Jesus said...Neither do I...sin no more.*] The mingled kindness and perfect wisdom of this sentence deserve special notice. Our Lord says nothing of the question whether the woman deserved punishment and what kind of punishment. He simply says, "I do not condemn you." It is not my province or office to judge or pronounce any sentence." Nor yet does He tell the woman that she may go away without stain or blemish on her character. On the contrary, He implies that she has sinned and was guilty. But in the absence of witnesses, she might go away clear of punishment. Nor yet does He say, "Go in peace," as in Luke vii.50 and viii.48.

"Go," He says, "and *sin no more.*" How anyone, in the face of this text, can say that our Lord palliates and condones the woman's sin it is rather hard to understand. That He refused to condemn her is clear and plain, because it was not His office. That He ignored or connived at her sin, as Hengstenberg says (in his argument against the genuineness of the whole passage), can never be proved. The very last words show what He thought of her case: "Sin no more." She had sinned and had only escaped from lack of evidence. Let her remember that and "sin no more."

Augustine remarks: "How Lord? Do you then favor sin? Not so, assuredly. Mark what He says. 'Go: henceforth sin no more.' You see them that the Lord condemned, but He condemned sin, not man. For were He a favorer of sin, He would say, 'Neither will I condemn you. Go: live as you will.'"

The remark of Euthymius, that our Lord considered the public shame and exposure sufficient punishment for the woman's sin, is thoroughly unsatisfactory and not warranted by anything in the context. The view of Bullinger and some others, that one principal object of the passage is to teach our Lord's mercy and readiness to pardon great sinners, appears to me quite destitute of foundation. Christ's abounding mercy is a great truth, but not the truth of this passage. There seems no parallel between this woman and the Samaritan woman in John iv.

Poole observes that our Lord does not merely say, "Commit adultery no more, but, Sin no more. No partial repentance or sorrow for any particular sin will suffice a penitent that hopes for mercy from God, but a leaving off all sin, of what kind soever it is."