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Ouachita Baptist University

Short Exegetical On John 7:53-8:11

Poetic Justice in Jesus

Spring 2020

Life of Christ

Dr. Duvall

By: Jaime D. Bunting

Context:

John 7:45-52	John 7:53-8:11	John 8:12-20
<p>In the previous passages, Jesus secretly goes to the Feast of the Tabernacles, only making himself known halfway through the celebration. With a public statement on the “last and greatest” day of the feast, Jesus upsets the Pharisees who then send temple guards to arrest him, while people continue to debate whether Jesus is the Christ. <i>Finally</i>, at the onset of this passage, the temple guards do not arrest Jesus, in fact, they defend their actions to the Pharisees by claiming they have never seen anyone speak the way Jesus does, alluding to their awe of his authority and/or teaching. This declaration only further upsets the Pharisees, who blame the guards and “the mob” for being ignorant followers who know nothing of the law and who they believe to be “under a curse”. Then Nicodemus, who previously had an eye-opening encounter with Jesus, steps in. Nicodemus uses the law the Pharisees claim to know to flip their assertion on its head: that they should not be condemning Jesus and cannot without first hearing his testimony. Even so, the Pharisees miss Nicodemus’ point, in turn accusing him, and the feast and scene end with everyone going to their own homes.</p>	<p>Jesus does not go home like everyone else, however, he goes to the Mount of Olives until dawn. When dawn comes, Jesus travels to the temple courts, sits, and teaches those who have gathered around him. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law show up, ironically calling Jesus “teacher” and touting their knowledge of the Law of Moses (though they only intend to trap Jesus), presumably wanting Jesus to approve the stoning of a woman they claim has been caught in adultery, who they have now made stand before Jesus and those he was teaching. In response, Jesus bends down and writes on the ground. After continuous questioning by the accusers, Jesus gives the command that if any one of them is without sin, then they can cast the first stone at the accused woman. With this, Jesus returns to his writing on the ground, and the crowd leaves one by one, leaving Jesus alone with the accused woman. Only then does Jesus address the woman, assuring her that none of her accusers were without sin, nor could they condemn her, and so neither would he. Jesus lastly sends her away with the opportunity to live a new life free of sin.</p>	<p>Jesus then speaks to the people and claims that he is the light of the world and the light of life. The Pharisees become further angered and assert that his testimony is false because he is his own witness. Jesus responds by 1. Challenging the law by stating even if the Pharisees do not believe his personal testimony, it is still valid and 2. Explaining that he is within their “own Law” of the required two witnesses: himself and his father who sent him. Therefore, Jesus explains that he does not judge anyone, or by the same human standards that the Pharisees do, but that if he did, his judgements would be by right because they are one with the Fathers. Still not understanding, the Pharisees question Jesus, “where is your father”. Jesus then tries to make it clear that they are missing the point. Jesus is the Christ, and therefore is one with the Father they claim to know, but whom they do not fully know because they do not know Jesus. Jesus gave his message in the temple where offerings were. Though plots had been made, no one arrested Jesus because his time had not yet come to.</p>

It is important to begin by acknowledging that though John 7:53-8:11 is a beloved and powerful passage, it does not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts of the bible. This however does not take away from the “historical veracity” of the passage (that they are true acts of Jesus), nor should it take away from its message (Kruse, 198). William Barclay proposes that the passage may have been excluded from original manuscripts for fear of causing “scandal” or a

“light view of adultery” within the developing Christian church (Barclay, 336). This assertion makes sense in the context of when John was likely written: in Ephesus, after the split within Judaism (those who believe in Jesus as Messiah versus those who do not), when the new church faced opposition as they pulled away from tradition and Law (Duvall, 2016).

Thus it is likely that the passage does not belong where it is set chronologically, however, it is intentionally placed as a way to further the theme that the story illustrates: the falsehood of the Pharisees and Jesus’ claim in John 8:15 that he “passes judgement on no one” (Burge, 2012).

In regards to the falsehood of the Pharisees, all three passages are rich with irony. One irony is that the Pharisees tout self-righteousness in the Law, but are found to not be following it themselves. In chapter 7, Nicodemus points this out by using the law outlined in Deuteronomy, that “justice” must be given to the accused, by allowing testimony and multiple witnesses, before coming to a conclusion (or arresting Jesus as the Pharisees wanted to) (Barclay, 266-268). It is also ironic that the Pharisees and scribes (teachers of the law) were guilty of exactly what they blamed the “mobs” of being guilty of: acting in contradiction to the law, as well as being “under a curse”. In this case, the Pharisees were the ones “under a curse” of their own religious judgements and stereotypes, blinding them from acknowledging the Messiah that was right before their eyes. The Pharisees, who claimed to know God most, and whose laws were to prepare them for recognizing the Messiah, even when confronted by “one of their own” (Nicodemus), retorted with belittling questions such as, “are you too from Galilee?” or to Jesus, “where is your father?”.

The story of Jesus having compassion on the woman accused of adultery is placed before a passage in which Jesus speaks of being the light of the world. In this, Jesus also speaks to the religious law, explaining that he is not subject to this law, but even if he were, he would be found in alignment with it due to being one with the Father. This context displays Jesus being true to his words (by not condemning the woman; not passing judgement on her), as well as giving energy to the powerful message that Jesus chooses grace and redemption, even though he is without sin and could choose punishment, and that this choice is “right” and therefore within the will of God. The narrative told within these passages is thus one of the Pharisees looking for ways to entrap Jesus in the law, as Jesus continues to show that he is the ultimate truth, not the law.

Details:

Who?	Each (Pharisees, Chief Priests, Nicodemus, Temple Guards)	7:53
	Jesus	8:1, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11
	the people	8:2
	the group (gatherers & Jesus)	8:3
	The teachers of the law & the Pharisees (they)	8:3, 6, 7, 10
	Woman / her (who has been caught in adultery)	8:3, 4(x2), 7, 9, 10,
	Teacher	8:4
	Moses	8:5
	“any one of you” (accusers)	8:7
	Those who heard Jesus’ command	8:9
	The older ones (Pharisees? accusers? Those who heard?)	8:9

	No one	8:10, 11
	I (Jesus)	8: 11
What?	Each went to his own home, but Jesus went to the Mount	7:53 & 8:1
	Jesus appeared and sat in temple courts, teaching those who gathered	8:2
	Teachers of the law & Pharisees brought an adulterous woman & made her stand before Jesus & those gathered, trying to trap Jesus with a question of the ten commandments in attempts to have grounds for accusations against him founded in law (trying to get Jesus to contradict himself?)	8:3-6
	Jesus responds by writing on the ground; only after continuous questioning does he give this command: if any one of the accusers has not sinned, they can throw the first stone at the woman.	8:7
	Jesus returns to the ground and continues writing	8:8
	In response to Jesus' ultimatum, those who heard Jesus' words, one by one, with the older of the group going first, walked away, leaving only Jesus before the woman.	8:9
	Jesus then turns up from the ground and addresses the woman specifically, asking her, "where did they (accusers) go? Has no one condemned (stoned) you?"	8:10
	The woman answers Jesus: no one has condemned (stoned) her	8:11
	Jesus (who is without sin & could have thrown the first stone) declares to the adulterous woman that he will not condemn her. Jesus tells her to "go now" and leave her life of sin behind.	8:11
When?	Jesus appears in Temple courts (at dawn, after Mount of Olives)	8:1
	Teachers of the law & Pharisees brought woman to temple courts (after Jesus began to teach)	8:2
	Jesus writes on ground (after being questioned)	8:6
	Jesus responds (after continuous questioning), then goes back to writing	8:7-8
	Accusers and listeners left one by one (after hearing what Jesus said)	8:9
	Jesus addresses the woman (after the onlookers have left)	8:9-11
	Jesus does not condemn the woman; after displaying that the others could not condemn her due to their own lives of sin	8:9-11
Where?	His own home	7:53
	Mount of Olives	8:1
	Temple Courts	8:2
	On the ground	8:6
Why?	Jesus goes to the temple courts to teach those gathered	8:1
	Teachers & Pharisees question Jesus about adultery to trap and accuse him	8:3-6
	Jesus "straightened up" from the ground to respond to accusers and to later address the woman	8:7-11

How?	Jesus teaches (sitting down)	8:2
	They “made her” <i>stand</i> before the likely <i>sitting</i> group	8:3
	The woman was caught (in adultery)	8:4
	The Law (commanded by Moses)	8:5
	Jesus bent down and writes on the ground with his finger	8:6, 8
	Jesus responds (after “straightening up” from being bent over)	8:7
	One by one (those who heard, left)	8:9
	Jesus spoke to the woman with questions	8:10
	Jesus declares: go <i>now</i> , leave <i>sin</i>	8:11

Background:

Mount of Olives:

It is interesting that the evangelist of John dedicated two entire verses to the setting of this story: that each went to his own home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. It is not explicitly written why Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives, but it is known from other passages that Jesus stays with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany, which is on the other side of the Mount of Olives, suggesting when this story occurred in Jesus’ ministry (Kruse, 198). This verse also may serve the purpose of showing that Jesus depended upon other people for shelter during his ministry. Jesus may have also gone to the Mount for prayer and preparation for his day of teaching, which would agree with passages in the synoptic gospels.

Illumination of the Temple:

A ceremony that took place during the Feast of the Tabernacles. Four great candelabras, placed in the center of the Court of Women, were lit during this ceremony and provided light for every courtyard in Jerusalem. This lighting was followed by a night of dance and praise. The Illumination of the Temple thus provided a striking backdrop for Jesus’ “I am the Light of the world” proclamation. Jesus was trying to relay that his Light, the light of life, would not only last one night, but would be a guide throughout one’s whole life (Barclay, 10-13).

Adultery:

A very serious and rare accusation in Jesus’ time. It was equated with idolatry and murder as one of the three “gravest sins” in Jewish culture (Barclay, 2). In Jewish law, the consequence of adultery was death. This is outlined in Leviticus, as well as in Deuteronomy and the Mishnah, where it is specified that death for the woman should occur by stoning. Capital punishment in Jewish law raises questions as Jews did not even have the authority to carry out this law under Roman rule (Barclay, 2). Furthermore, Jewish law requires both the adulterer and adulterous to be present and punished. Interestingly, if a woman was put to death, her husband inherited her property, but if divorced, he did not. In the noted passage, the husband was not present to testify against her, which presents the possibility that the woman may have been set-up, which would be a “reprehensible injustice” to Jesus (Burge, 2012). Though, the Pharisees do claim to be an eyewitness to the act, which Jesus seems to base his response off of. Why did the Pharisees not present the “caught” man to Jesus also, then?

“The People of the Land”:

In 7:49, the term “this mob” is used by the Pharisees to set themselves apart from those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah. It can be translated to “people of the land”, which is a derogatory term used against people who did not strictly follow the “thousands” of regulations in Jewish law. Six of these regulations, outlined in rabbinic writing, are as follows: do not let them testify for you, do not trust their own testimony, do not allow them to have guardianship of orphans, do not let them handle charitable funds, and do not take trips with them. Furthermore, it was illegal to host them as company and encouraged to avoid buying and selling products to them (Barclay, 267). This is because the Pharisees wanted to maintain their “ritual purity”, which they believed would be tainted by associating with the “people of the land” or the “unclean” (Kruse, 195-196).

The Message:

The gospel of John is a book of juxtapositions. It is often noted as appearing simple on the surface, but once studied, is found to be full of deep theological truth. This is the case for John 7:53-8:11: Jesus forgiving a woman accused of adultery. In the passage that precedes it, those who hear Jesus’ teachings are confronted with assessing if they believe Jesus to be the Messiah. In the passage that follows, Jesus claims to be the light of the world in a culture where light was linked to God, and poetically states, “if you knew me, you would know my father also”. Who Jesus is, is beautifully displayed in how he handles the delicate situation presented to him by the Pharisees and the woman, thus clearing up any confusion about the nature of the Messiah: a compassionate and thoughtful teacher, a friend to the sinner, and an unconditional offeror of grace and forgiveness. Through confrontation with the Pharisees and Scribes, it is exemplified that Jesus did not in fact come to the world to condemn the world, but to save it; Jesus came to save the world from sin through providing a path of love, grace, and forgiveness. The evangelist of John is saying “want to know the heart of God the Father? Look to the heart of Jesus.” How Jesus treats the woman in this scene is thus contrasted with the attitude of the Pharisees to display that Jesus’ truth is ultimate over the established law.

The Pharisees wanted only to use the woman caught in adultery to serve their purposes. They saw her as a “tool” or a “pawn in the game to destroy Jesus”, disregarding the woman’s feelings and dignity (Barclay, 6-7).” The woman was made to stand before Jesus and those gathered around him in the temple courts. The woman was standing; Jesus and the crowds were sitting. This dynamic would intensify her likely existing feeling of humiliation. In a culture that regards dishonor as almost worse than death itself, this is significant.

Jesus, however, recognizes the woman’s humanity and takes her feelings and dignity into account. He does this firstly by waiting to address the accused woman until everyone else has left the temple. Jesus refuses to debate the matter of adultery on the Pharisees terms, which are hostile and argumentative, leading only to her further humiliation (Barclay, 7-8). Jesus instead responds to their hostility by first writing on the ground, and then answering with a command for her accusers to ponder internally: “am I without sin, or a sinful desire?”. Of course the answer is no, which leaves only Jesus and the woman, allowing her to no longer be in the face of public embarrassment.

Then occurs one of the most striking insights of the passage: Jesus is the only one to address the woman in the entire scene. It is written that he straightens up from the ground,

putting aside whatever he was writing, and turns his attention to her. Before Jesus speaks, the accused woman was in fear for her life; she thought she may be stoned to death. Thus, Jesus again takes this into consideration and begins not by speaking of her sin, but by letting her know that she would not be condemned by him either. This likely brought a sigh of relief to the woman. Jesus first offers her peace and grace, then addresses her sin.

When Jesus does address the woman's adultery, he breaks through the limitations that the Pharisees tried to set-up (that the only option of sin is punishment and death) and presents her rather with the option to live life anew, free from sin. Jesus forgives the woman first, offers her grace regardless, then leaves the choice of accepting this redemption up to her. Jesus does not limit her room for growth (as her accusers suggest), but provides her the opportunity to move forward, with the encouragement of now knowing that she is seen, loved, and accepted by Jesus Christ who is encouraging her along the way.

Application:

The accusers of the woman were imperfect, yet wanted to condemn the woman; Jesus is perfect, yet chose not to condemn the woman. Jesus stating, "if any one of you is without sin, then let him be the first to throw the stone at her", followed by those who heard this leaving one by one, displays Jesus' point that the accusers had no right to be the judge and jury of the woman. We are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God, which William Barclay calls the "human situation". Yet, we still try to be "moral-watchdogs" who set up double-standards to judge one another with. Too often I hear people say in the face of witnessing someone they do not agree with, suffer, "well, that must have been what they deserved." This conceptualization is tainted, however. The truth is, it is not our job to cast blame or determine if someone "gets what they deserve"; God is the only one with the full-picture and full-altruism. This is not to say that we should ignore sin, but that we should use the "authority" (or influence) we have in one another's lives to help each other heal and move past our mistakes (because we all make them). It is said that "all true authority is found in sympathy (Barclay, 5)." Jesus believed in the hope and redemption of the woman accused of adultery; we should also believe in and encourage one another when we fall short, not by casting judgement, but through love, asking the question, "how can I best be there for this person and help them heal?"

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