

## **Reading John 8:2-11** ***in its Jewish cultural setting***

### **Introduction**

In this reading of John 8 I will try to place it in its Jewish cultural setting. By doing so, it is hoped we will gain further insight to what Jesus was actually saying and how this might better be applied today in our context.

Jesus was a Jew. He was born to a Jewish mother. He was raised according to the Jewish traditions and celebrated the Jewish festivals. He worshipped in the synagogue and Temple. His community, family and friends were Jewish. Jesus was imbedded in his culture and spoke from this context. He preached from Jewish texts and proclaimed of himself: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” (Mathew 5:17) Jesus died as a Jew. John 8 is set within the Jewish festival of Sukkot as celebrated in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jerusalem. Having placed our reading in this context, I will then unfold to the two major encounters Jesus had with the ruling religious elite.

### **The Feast of Sukkot**

Jesus had secretly gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the seven-day Feast of “Sukkot” (סֻכּוֹת) also known as the Feast of Tabernacles, Feast of the Ingathering, and the Feast of Booths (Exodus 23:16; 34:22). Sukkot was one of three Jewish pilgrimage festivals “Shalosh Regalim” (שְׁלוֹשׁ רִגְלֵי) where it was commanded to celebrate at the Jerusalem Temple (Exodus 23:14-17). Sukkot marks the end of the harvest, the ingathering of crops from the land (15-22 Tishri – sometime in September / October time). Sukkot had also developed into a commemoration of God’s protection during the wilderness years in the desert (Leviticus 23:42-43). Sukkot is the plural form of “Sukkah” (סֻכָּה), which is the name of the temporary dwelling (booth, tabernacle) in which farmers would live during harvesting, thereby connecting the fest to the harvest. This booth is also reminiscent of the shelters the Israelites lived in the 40 years of wandering in the desert (Leviticus 23:42-43). The Sukkah is made of vegetation, most commonly palm leaves during the Feast of Sukkot (Leviticus 23:40). At the time of Jesus, Jerusalem would have been an array of booths, filled with pilgrims. After the first day of solemn rest and worship, there would have been six festive days of prayers, processions, and daily sacrifices in the Temple. The eighth and final day was the return of solemn rest and worship.

### **Round one**

Jesus arrived incognito for the festival of Sukkot. To begin with Jesus did not want to draw attention to himself (John 7:8). Jesus was the talk of the town, and the Jews in Jerusalem were looking for him: “Where is he?” (John 7:11). It was only in the middle of Sukkot that Jesus decides to reveal himself by going up to the Temple (John 7:14). This is showdown time. Those around him marvelled at teaching: “How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?” (John 7:15) On the last day of the feast, Jesus cried out: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ ” (John 7:37-38) This declaration was reminiscent of the voice of God in the words of Isaiah 55:1-3. Jesus was proclaiming himself as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. The stage is being set for a head-to-head confrontation with the religious leaders of the

day (Sanhedrin). In their view, Jesus' teaching was an affront to their religious authority. Officers from the Sanhedrin are sent to arrest Jesus (John 7:32). They return empty handed, declaring that they too had never heard anyone teach like this (John 7:46). The chief priests and Pharisees were mad: "Have you also been deceived?" (John 7:47) They turn against the people, condemning them for not knowing the law of Moses, the Torah (John 7:46). Only Nicodemus tries to offer some sanity: "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" (John 7:51) Even this was received with disdain, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." (John 7:52) However, Nicodemus' words are heard, and a hearing is decided, but in reality they devise a plan to ensnare and condemn Jesus.

### **Round two**

The following day, Jesus returns to the Temple to teach. The scribes and the Pharisees begin their carefully constructed ploy. The curtain is lifted for round two of the drama. The Pharisees devise a plan they are convinced will get Jesus. The Pharisees had *lost face* in front of the crowds yesterday, but today was going to be different. It was no longer an issue of right or wrong, but of *saving face*. In a Middle Eastern culture, honour and shame are often the defining determinators in cultural interplay (unlike guilt and innocence which undergirds western society). Such a worldview of honour and shame impregnated the Jewish culture of Jesus' time. To illustrate, I share a modern-day interaction with Gad Saad and one of his family members:<sup>1</sup>

*Family member:* Those ancient Greeks, those Christians, they were real anti-Semites.

Me: I don't mean to correct you but the Greeks in question were not Christian.

*Family member:* What are you talking about? Of course, they were. Greeks are Christians.

Me: Yes. They are Christians today. But the time period in which the ancient Greeks lived is labeled BC, which stands for "Before Christ." In other words, by definition the era in which they existed is labeled in a manner that recognizes that they were not Christian.

*Family member:* [realizing that the weight of evidence is now fully against him] Yes, yes. So I was right. They were not Christians. That's what I said, not you.

Pause for a minute and process this exchange. The person in question could not accept that he had lost an argument to a younger and hence "lower-ranked" individual. His honor had been damaged. He had to protect himself against the apparent shame that such a "defeat" might entail. Hence, in an extraordinarily dishonest yet painfully transparent ploy, he altered our respective positions in

---

<sup>1</sup> Gad Saad Ph.D, Psychology Today, posted Dec. 16, 2014, *The Pathologies of Cultures of Honor and Shame: The dark side of pride: Shameful with little honor*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/homo-consumericus/201412/the-pathologies-cultures-honor-and-shame>, accessed 08.06.18.

this debate. Apparently, I did not have the [cognitive \(memory\)](#) capacity to remember that I was the one arguing that they were not Christian whilst he was arguing that they were!

Like this family member, the honour of the Sanhedrin had been threatened by the younger (and less educated) man. Members of the Sanhedrin, and notably the Pharisees could not admit that Jesus was more knowledgeable about the Torah. They felt the weight of their shame. They would do anything in their power to retrieve their *honour*, by twisting this around by publicly *shaming* Jesus. What would be better than bringing a woman supposedly caught in adultery! Sexual sin, as it always does, heightens and intensifies the drama. At a familial, tribal and societal level the desire to maintain honour and hence avoid shame is often linked to the control of a women's sexuality. The honour of a clan would bewitch their members if married woman is unfaithful. The tension was in the air, the supposed woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus. They had lost the battle the day before, but now they were going to win the war. This menace Jesus was going to get the full force of their knowledge of the Torah and feel the strong arm of enforcement. The people would see Jesus for who he is, a charlatan, a false prophet. He was going to be shamed into silence, or so they thought...

While Jesus is teaching in the Temple area, the scribes and the Pharisees present the woman and say: "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" (John 8:4-5) At first appearance, this scenario seems quite plausible, yet it is flawed. There are questions to be asked: How did they catch a woman in adultery? If she really was caught in the act, then where was her partner? If they were such experts of the Torah, they would know that the Torah did not exclude the man. He too should have been presented, and if found guilty, should be stoned (Leviticus 20:10). The previous day they accused the crowds for not knowing the Torah, and now ironically, they are the ones who do not know the Torah! Any sense of propriety has been thrown out of the window. Their sense of shame had overtaken their rational minds.

Imagine the setting, they bring the woman before the crowds and interrupt Jesus as he teaches. Not only are there crowds of Jews, the Roman authorities are overlooking them. Around three sides of the Temple area there was a covered walkway, and at the northern end there was a large military fort. The 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish historian Josephus documented that this walkway was patrolled by Roman soldiers who would keep an eye on any unrest.<sup>2</sup> They had easy access to disperse and arrest. Roman rule was based upon order and this was enforced by the most severe means, as Jesus was later to experience firsthand. Everyone waits with baited breath to hear Jesus' reply. It is showdown!

What were the real options for answering this question? If he said yes, then according to the Torah she had to be stoned. This would have had caused an uproar. This would have been seen as a direct violation of the Roman rule which strictly forbade the Jewish people to put people to death (John 18:31). Jesus would have been arrested. If he had bowed to the Roman authority and

---

2

Josephus, Flavius, *The Wars of the Jews 5:5.244, The Works of Josephus*, translation William Whiston, re. ed. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1987), p.709 as cited by Baily E. Kenneth, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, SPCK, pub. 208, p.233.

minimized the punishment, he would have been accused of being weak, a coward. The Pharisees thought they had got Jesus trapped, fair and square. However, what was to unfold, was an act of mastery!

Not only does Jesus show us that he knows the Torah, he even illustrates how aware he is of the Jewish Mishnah (the written account of the Oral Law). According to rabbinic Judaism, the Oral Law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai and was passed on by word and mouth throughout the generations. The Pharisees accepted the Oral Law along with the Torah, as being equally inspired and authoritative. The Mishnah had collected these sayings and provided rabbinic interpretations. In responding to the Pharisees' question, Jesus writes in the sand. The context of this encounter would have been a sabbath day (Leviticus 23:34-36; John 7:37; 8:1). According to Mishnah, it is forbidden to write on the Sabbath except when it leaves no lasting mark: "[If] one writes with a liquid, or with a fruit juice, or in the dust of the road, or with any substance that does not endure, he is exempt."<sup>3</sup> Jesus disarms the Pharisees with his knowledge of the Oral Law as well as the Torah.

The thousand-dollar question is what does Jesus write? We do not know. Following the event leading up to this story and knowing that Jesus said of himself – that he had come to fulfil the Torah,<sup>4</sup> it is reasonable to imagine he wrote the verdict according to the Torah: "Death". In a true twist of events, Jesus' next move completely threw his audience: 'He stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." ' (John 8:7)

Their own Jewish Scriptures (Tanakh) clearly state that all have sinned.<sup>5</sup> As cultural norms dictate, the crowds look to the eldest member of the scribes and Pharisees to see if he has the courage to respond appropriately. He has no choice; he like all of us has sinned in his life. He turns and walks away, followed by the others in descending order. The Pharisees and scribes had lost yet another battle. Their fury intensifies, and their sense of shame deepens. They had to wait for yet another day to lash out their final blow.

As the crowds disperse, and with the woman remaining, Jesus writes a second time in the sand. What does he write? We do not know. Only Jesus, the sinless one has the right to remain and pronounce the penalty. Jesus stands up and says to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." (John 8:10-11) Jesus saves the woman from her accusers and from a certain and cruel death. Jesus fulfils the Torah and accepts the due punishment of the Torah,

---

3

The Sefaria Library, *Mishnah*, Shabbat 12:5, [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Shabbat.12.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Shabbat.12.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en), accessed 08.06.18.

4

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." (Matthew 5:17)

5

Isaiah 53:6; Ecclesiastes 7:20.

but removes its penalty. He is pointing to the day, which will come very soon, when the penalty of sin will be paid. The shadow of the cross is upon him, his hour is soon to come...