

Throw the First Stone
John 8:3-8

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This story in John's Gospel exposes aspects of the Hebrew law that I take issue with. I think Jesus did, too. It poses so many questions I don't quite know where to begin. But I do have a sense of where we need to end.

First off, this story was a later addition. It's not found in the oldest and best manuscripts. In many translations you will find this story [bracketed] with footnote that says "later addition to the original." So it is not part of the earliest transmission of manuscripts but rather some kind of scribal gloss, an addition from a later copier. This could also mean that this story was passed around through oral tradition and only written down later. Who knows? What we do know is that the story seems a bit foreign to John's Gospel, both by content and style; it has the marks of another author. Just read a chapter before it and a chapter after it and you will see the difference. This sounds more like the Jewish Matthew rather than John.

All that said, let's just take the story at face value and see what we can find. The story has a simple plot. Jewish leaders drag a woman accused of adultery before Jesus. In the Law of Moses this is considered a capital offense, punishable by stoning. Since they are trying to trap Jesus they put him in a spot: Cast your verdict, Jesus. Are you true to the law or not?

This is similar to another trick when they asked Jesus if good Jews should pay taxes to the occupying empire, Rome. Jesus asked for a Roman coin and asked whose inscription was on it. When they answered it was Caesar's he famously answered that they should pay unto Caesar what belongs to him. But then came the left hook: *But pay unto God what belongs to God*. What started out as a two-barreled trap – whether he would wrongly aid an invader or be disloyal to him – turned into a lesson on what should be our highest loyalty; what we owe to God. But before we look at how Jesus turned their ambush around on them, let's return to the issue of capital punishment in the Jewish law itself.

The law has a long list of moral infractions that are punishable by stoning, burning, beheading. Most of them don't represent a punishment for committing murder (though some of them do, like human sacrifice of a child to a foreign deity). Most of them cite punishments for offences that violate some cultural taboo. In the Jewish law there are lots of offenses that merit some form of capital punishment.

As you read later in the Rabbis such as in the Talmud and other places, capital punishment was seldom actually applied. Most of the time the death penalty only indicated the severity of a violation. Seldom did it actually result in the capital punishment itself.

That cheered me a bit, because I have to tell you, if I'm really honest with you, all of these long lists of capital offenses in the religious law made me think one thing: *What barbarians*. This is the case of tribal societies trying to keep order and purity by threatening punishment. In no way do I consider

this prescriptive, as in, we should do this ourselves. In fact, I just have to say that it's fairly monstrous. You can see my problem with all this stoning, slashing and burning in order to enforce moral codes. I am certain beyond the shadow of a doubt that the prescribed capital punishment was far more evil than the offense that gave rise to it in the first place.

I am wondering what Jesus first thinks as he sees the disheveled woman in a heap on the ground, surrounded by a bunch of men with stones. Unfortunately that scenario is far too familiar to us today: women being tried before the court of men, their lives and destinies determined by men who have the power, make their decisions for them and make decisions that adversely affect them.

So you can see I am having difficulty on two scores already – ubiquitous violence tied to the religious law and patriarchal power of men over women. But now it's Jesus turn. What will he do? I am certain that he disagrees with it too. But for the same the same objections I have? Because of the

outsized violence, the coercive attempt at moral control, the victimization of women?

To begin with, Jesus squats down and scribbles in the dirt. Much has been made of this and many a person better than me has speculated on what it means. People have said everything from he was writing the names of the men who sinned in similar ways, to doodling while he thought about it, to pausing for the dramatic one-two punch. I don't know what he was doing. But I like it. That's exactly how a good story does its work – just enough mystery to invite the listener to lean in and wait for the answer.

Instead of debating the how, who and when of the law, Jesus goes a whole other direction. He turns the focus back on the ones who have the rocks in their hands, the ones who are making the accusations. He says, in essence, “Okay, go right ahead. If you've never sinned you have the right to judge someone else. Let the sinless among you throw the first one.”

Jesus reframed the entire conversation from “who deserves to be punished” to “who has the moral superiority to judge anyone else.”

Now the weight of decision is in the rock holders' court. Slowly, one at a time, stones drop out of their hands and thud on the ground. It starts with the oldest ones first. Why the oldest ones? Were they the wisest? Had they made more than their fair share of mistakes in the past and didn't want to add another one to their long list? Did it take longer for the hot-headed young toughs to cool off?

Indeed, as Jesus said elsewhere, “Judge not lest you be judged.” If you can't extend mercy to a human being who is fallible just like you are fallible, should you receive mercy? If you can't pray with all your heart “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” and then do it, should you receive forgiveness? Who made you prosecutor, judge and jury?

I've always had the deep suspicion that Jesus was just as disheartened with the Jewish law as I am. Even though he is presented as saying he came to

fulfill the law, I have always wondered, “Fulfill it in what way?” His proposals always seem so out of step with the letter of the law.

You remember when he was asked which of the laws was the greatest he gave them two, to love God with your whole being and to love your neighbor as yourself. Together, those two present the highest calling of faith and the loftiest moral ethic. But they stand in contrast to the stoning, slashing and burning. How can this be fulfillment in any sense of that word? Or does it mean those two principles supersede everything else, that when in doubt trust these?

I don't know the mind of Jesus in this regard, only what he said to do instead. Instead of judging and killing this woman, look to your own life. Measure yourself by the high demands of love and see where you go wanting. When you compare Jesus' own teaching found in the Sermon on the Mount it doesn't sound anything like the Jewish law with its endless capital offenses. Is the fulfillment that it corrects or moves beyond all that? I hope so,

because if the Hebrew law was all there was I couldn't, wouldn't be a follower.

Thankfully it's not, for the woman, for all of us who are inclined to judge others but not ourselves, and some religious people who are ever ready to use some kind of physical or emotional violence to control their people.

I'm glad Jesus didn't simply reinforce that, but broke away in another direction altogether, fulfilling what seems to be a jagged beginning with a whole different ending.

Of course, the One who pled the cause of the woman became a victim of that same law himself. The same religious authorities accused him of blasphemy, a charge punishable by what else, capital punishment. The Romans didn't give a whit about Jewish law. All they cared about was placating and subduing the masses. So they would throw them a bone every so often. Jesus was one of those bones. And the law that he fulfilled, completed, and

transformed was the same law that killed him by the same human nature that throws stones.

And when he hung on the cross, abandoned by all who followed him, we hear it was the women who mourned him and kept vigil at his pierced feet. Did they know it was him who turned aside the mob from one of their own, a mob he couldn't turn aside from himself.

Sometimes it takes a sacrifice to fulfill, finish, and transform the world into something new. The old ways just don't go quietly into that dark night. They kick and scream all the way into the dust bin of history, a final death rattle of the old, violent, abusive ways that have been cloaked in the respectable garments of religion for so long.

In that one moment Jesus uncovered the truth at work behind their codes and laws and precepts and punishments. And this revolutionary fulfilled them by delivering us from them.

Nevertheless, the followers of Jesus routinely forget that his way neither resembles the powers and principalities of this world nor the accoutrements of a cultural Christianity.

That is why we must retell this story, a story that almost didn't make it into the Bible. We must tell and hear this story that reminds us that there is an infinite distinction between the actual presence of God and the distorted ways people have construed it.

And the way that we fulfill the perfect will of God in our own time may be to transcend the letter of the law with the deeper spirit of the law, exactly the kind of move Jesus made when they dragged a woman to his feet, stones in hand, and asked him what to do.