

Sacra Pagina Series

Volume 4

The Gospel of John

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pora) see W. C. van Unnik, *Das Selbstverständnis der Jüdischen Diaspora in der hellenistisch-römischen Zeit* (ed. P. W. van der Horst. AGJU 17. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).

teach the Greeks: On the irony created by the suggestion of "the Jews" that his departure will lead to his teachings being made available to the Greeks see Kysar, *John's Story* 46.

d) On the Last Day of the Feast (7:37–8:59)

The Structure of 7:37–8:59. There are three major sections to the narrative reporting events that take place in the Temple on "the last day of the feast" (v. 37).

- i. 7:37–52: Jesus' revelation of himself as the living water leads to *schismata* among "the people" and the Pharisees.
- ii. 8:12–30: Jesus' revelation of himself as "the light of the world" and the consequences, both positive and negative, of his revealing presence.
- iii. 8:31–59: Jesus and "the Jews" enter into unresolvable conflict and acrimonious accusations about their respective origins.

The density of the argument increases as Jesus and "the Jews" become locked in bitter accusation and counter-accusation.

1. Jesus, "the People," and the Leaders (7:37–52)

37. On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, 38. and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" 39. Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. 40. When they heard these words some of the people said, "This is really the prophet." 41. Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? 42. Has not the scripture said that the Christ is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" 43. So there was a division among the people over him. 44. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. 45. The officers then went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" 46. The officers answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" 47. The Pharisees answered them, "Are you led astray, you also? 48. Have any of the authorities or of the

Pharisees believed in him? 49. But this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed."

50. Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 51. "Does our law judge people without first giving them a hearing to know what they do?" 52. They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee."

INTERPRETATION

The eighth day of the feast, the last day, was similar to a Sabbath (cf. Lev 22:33-43). It was a day of great rejoicing, and the singing of the *Hallel* continued (cf. *m. Sukk.* 4:8; Josephus, *Ant.* 3:245, 247). The celebratory use of water and light, however, ceased on the seventh day. On the day when these symbols had been eliminated from the ceremony Jesus stood up (*eistēkei*) and proclaimed (*ekraxen*) in the Temple that he is the provider of water (vv. 37-38) and the light of the world (8:12; cf. 9:5). For this reason the narrator calls this day "the great day." Jesus, the giver of water that will raise up to eternal life (4:14), the perfection of the creating God of the Sabbath (5:19-30), and the gift of God's bread from heaven (5:25-58), proclaims: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (vv. 37b-38) (on this punctuation and translation, see note). Within the context of a Jewish feast marked by libations and the promise of the coming Messiah who will repeat the Mosaic gift of water Jesus presents himself as the source of living water. He proposes another source of living water. No longer is there need to hold daily ritual lustrations, carrying water from the pool of Siloam. Jesus is the source of living water for *all* who believe in him (*ean tis dipsa . . . ho pisteuōn*); he transcends the ritual of the Jewish feast. The only criteria for admission to the lifegiving refreshment of Jesus are movement toward Jesus (v. 37: *erchesthō pros me*) and faith in him (v. 38a: *ho pisteuōn eis me*).

Jesus also claims he fulfills the Scriptures, promising rivers of living water flowing from within him (v. 38b), quenching the thirst of all who believe and come to him (vv. 37-38a). In Ezek 47:1-11 ever-deepening waters flow out from the Temple (vv. 3-6), enlivening the desert regions of the Arabah, via En-gedi and En-eglaim (vv. 8-11). Ezekiel 47:9 promises: "Everything will live where the river goes." Given the link between Zechariah 14 and the celebration of Tabernacles (cf. Zech 14:16-19), there may also be a reference to Zech 14:8: "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter" (cf. also 14:17). Jesus transcends all attempts to understand him within the cate-

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gories of Jewish messianic expectation (cf. vv. 14-36). In Ezek 47:1-11 the life-giving waters flowed from the Temple, the very center, the navel of Jerusalem and the earth (cf. Ezek 38:12; Jub. 8:19; b. Sanh. 37a). Jesus proclaims that the life-giving waters flow from within him (*ek tēs koilias autou*, See note.). "John uses this word as a means to transfer the prophecy from the city to a person" (Barrett, *Gospel* 328). Jesus' person is now the origin of life-giving water. He perfects the symbol of the definitive mediation of God's gift of water from the well of the Torah promised by the water celebrations of the feast of Tabernacles.

Jesus' proclamation, however, points to a future time: "Out of his heart shall flow (*rhesousin*) rivers of living water" (v. 38b). Later rabbinic reflection on the feast of Tabernacles asked of the water ceremony: "Why do they call it the house of drawing?" and responded: "Because thence they draw the Holy Spirit" (*Gen. Rab.* 70:1). This link between the drawing of the water and the gift of the Spirit may lie behind Jesus' words, but the perfection of this gift of God lies in a future moment marked by the glorification of Jesus. The Spirit has not yet been given because Jesus has not yet been glorified (v. 39). When will this be? Is this gift of the Spirit related to the traditional expectation of the effusion of the Spirit that will take place at the end of time (cf. Ezek 11:19; 36:26-27; 39:29; Isa 44:3; Joel 2:26; 3:1)? What is the link between the perfection of the messianic symbol of the water, the gift of the Spirit, and Jesus' glorification? When will this glorification take place? The growing threats of violence surrounding Jesus' presence in Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles (cf. 7:19-20, 23, 25, 30, 32), and his earlier hint to his brothers that his "time" would come at another feast of "the Jews" (7:5-8), point toward his death. A further prolepsis that seeks resolution has been created by Jesus' words and the narrator's comment (vv. 37-39). The perfection of the messianic promise, the gift of the Spirit, and the glorification of Jesus are linked to Jesus' death by crucifixion.

Jesus' words have been heard (v. 40a). His self-revelation as the perfection of the Mosaic gift of water, however, leads to a confession from some that he is "the prophet" (v. 40b) and from others that "this is the Christ" (v. 41). They are following a path already traveled by the Samaritan woman (cf. 4:13-26). The celebration of the feast of Tabernacles that recalled Jewish messianic ideas of the second gift of water, perfecting the Torah, explains the people's response (vv. 40-41) to Jesus' words (vv. 37-38). Jesus' self-revelation creates a situation in which the people and "the Jews" must come to a decision: is he the Messiah or not? The people, not privy to the narrator's comment in v. 39, continue their discussion on the basis of Jewish hope of the Davidic Messiah (cf. 2 Sam 7:12-16; Pss 18:50; 80:3-4, 35-37; Isa 11:1, 10; Jer 23:5). Some accept that Jesus is the Messiah on the basis of his words (cf. vv. 37-38), but others point out that Jesus

comes from Galilee, and the Christ is not to come from there (v. 41b). The Messiah would come from the Davidic line, and the Scriptures even indicate the city of his origins: Bethlehem, the village where David was (v. 42; cf. Mic 5:2). A Christian reader is aware of the tradition that Jesus was from Bethlehem, and Galilee is a place he visits to go away from his own country (cf. 4:42). But the irony runs deeper, as Jesus is "from God," not "from Galilee." There is a uniqueness about who Jesus is and what he is doing that cannot be resolved by Jewish messianic categories. Faced with this uniqueness, the people can only fall into disarray. There is a schisma over who Jesus is (v. 43), but some of the people (*tines . . . ex autōn*) join the Jerusalemites (cf. v. 30) and "the Jews" (cf. v. 32): they want to arrest Jesus (v. 44a), but are unable to do so. The reason for their ineffectual attempts has been given in v. 30: his hour has not yet come.

The messianic background to the celebration of Tabernacles has been strongly present in the attempts of the Jerusalemites and the people to locate Jesus within their messianic categories:

- the hidden Messiah (the Jerusalemites: vv. 26-27)
- the miracle-working Messiah (many of the people: v. 31)
- the Messiah who provides living water (some of the people: vv. 37-41a)
- the Davidic Messiah (some of the people: vv. 41b-42).

These attempts have led to confusion and violent threats among the people (vv. 43-44), but the Pharisees have made up their minds about Jesus (vv. 48-52). It has been some time since the temple officials (*hyperētai*) were sent to arrest Jesus (v. 32). They were sent out "about the middle of the feast" (v. 14), and they return "on the last day of the feast" (v. 42. Cf. v. 37). Thus they have heard Jesus' self-proclamation as the living water (vv. 37-38) and have attended the discussions between the people, wondering about his messianic status (vv. 40-44). They return to their masters empty handed, and they are asked to explain why (v. 45).

The officials recognize the uniqueness and the authority of the word of Jesus in their answer: "No man ever spoke like this man" (*oudepote elalēsen houtōs anthrōpos*). Unable to see beyond "this man," they are nevertheless rendered powerless by his word, and are accused of being led astray. The narrative began with some people suggesting that Jesus was leading the people astray (v. 12: *planai ton ochlon*), but they were afraid to speak openly about him for fear of "the Jews" (vv. 12-13). On the last day of the feast, after debates about Jesus' messianic status, "the Jews" openly challenge: "Are you led astray, you also?" (v. 47: *mē kai hymeis peplanēsthai?*). Jesus is publicly accused of being a deceiver (*planos*) whose teaching is deceptive (*planē*). In their accusations the Pharisees are using language found in rabbinic Judaism to speak of a pseudo-Messiah (cf. Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* 101-105). They claim that none

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of the leaders or the Pharisees have fallen to the subtleties of this man's words (v. 48). The authorities exclude themselves from all discussion over Jesus as Messiah, and regard those who engage in it as accursed, ignorant of the Law (v. 49).

Nicodemus, "one of them" (v. 50), raises questions concerning the interpretation of "our Law" (v. 51) and challenges the arrogant affirmation of v. 48. The Pharisees claim that *not one* of them had fallen to Jesus' trickery, but "one of them" emerges to defend Jesus. Nicodemus does not raise the messianic question, but queries the correctness of the procedure used against Jesus (v. 51). The officers claimed that no one has ever spoken as Jesus speaks (v. 46), but Nicodemus takes this further, asking the Pharisees why they condemn Jesus without first hearing from him (*ean mē akousē proton par'autou*) and coming to know what he does (*gnō ti poiei*). No legal precept in the OT or in rabbinic Judaism demands that the accused be heard and that the accuser come to know what he does. Nicodemus enunciates a new understanding of the Law: no judgment can be announced against Jesus unless his word first be heard in faith and his signs and works be recognized for what they are: the action of God in the Son. Nicodemus challenges the Pharisees by informing them that the only ones able to make a right judgment of Jesus are those who believe in him. The Pharisees and "the Jews" have never entered into dialogue with Jesus, but one of them, Nicodemus, has allowed himself to be challenged, and baffled, by the word of Jesus (3:1-11). He now advocates a new way of understanding God's design for the people; it is found in the words and deeds of Jesus (v. 51).

The Pharisees are not prepared to move away from their traditions and their sense of self-righteous control (cf. vv. 47-49). They attempt to escape from Nicodemus' accusations by heaping abuse on him (v. 52), just as they did with the Temple officers (v. 47) and the "crowd who do not know the Law" (v. 49). Ironically, the Pharisees are refusing to do the will of God (cf. v. 17) and they are no longer practicing the Law (cf. v. 19). They join that group of the people who rejected any messianic status for Jesus because they knew his origins (cf. v. 27, 41) and they call upon the evidence of the Scriptures that no prophet ever came from Galilee (v. 52). But Jesus did not come from Galilee, and there were prophets from Galilee (e.g., Jonah, Hosea, Nahum). Jesus is not just a prophet, and he is not "from Galilee." He is "from God."

NOTES

37. On the last day of the feast: It is not clear exactly which day is meant. There is no Jewish background for calling the seventh or the eighth day "the great

day." Many have suggested that the seventh day is intended (e.g., Brown, *Gospel* 1:320; Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 2:152; Str-B 2:490–491). The fact that neither the water nor the light ceremony took place on the eighth day, and that this is the day when Jesus reveals himself as the source of living water (7:37–38) and the light of the world (8:12; 9:5), indicates that "the last day" is the eighth day (cf. Bauer, *Johannesevangelium* 112; Hoskyns, *Gospel* 320; Barrett, *Gospel* 326; Lindars, *Gospel* 297–298).

come to me and drink: Three major problems are associated with the interpretation of vv. 37–39.

(1) *The question of punctuation*. Do the words of Jesus come to a full stop after "come to me and drink"? This would give the RSV translation, based on the text of Nestlé-Aland: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" This option (cf. Barrett, Bernard, Haenchen, Lightfoot, Léon-Dufour, Lindars, Segalla) is largely based on the punctuation suggested by the second-century Φ^{66} .

Is there a lesser break after "come to me," reading on until "the one who believes in me" for the full stop? This produces the translation adopted in the commentary: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow living water.'" There is increasing modern support for this punctuation (e.g., Bauer, Becker, Bultmann, Beasley-Murray, Boismard, Brown, Dodd, Hoskyns, Schnackenburg, Westcott, NRSV). There is also second-century evidence for this reading. See R. E. Brown, "The Gospel of Thomas and St John's Gospel," *NTS* 9 (1962–1963) 162.

(2) *The question of meaning*. Out of whose heart does the living water flow? The RSV translation leads to an interpretation that has the living water flowing from the heart of the believer. The NRSV continues this interpretation. But living water might flow from Jesus, to whom the believer has gone for refreshment. The heart (*koilia*: see below) mentioned in the quotation would refer back to Jesus as the provider of the drink. This would be the more likely meaning, but it is still possible that water might flow from inside the one who has gone to Jesus for refreshment, as a result of the association with Jesus. For the possibility that both Jesus and the believer are intended see F. Manns, *Le symbole eau-esprit dans le Judaïsme ancien*. SBFA 19. Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1983, 287–291.

(3) *The origins of the biblical text referred to in v. 38*. No text in either the MT or the LXX matches John 7:38b. Some (e.g., Obermann, *Die christologische Erfüllung* 38–39) claim that an OT source cannot be found. Yet the use of the singular *graphē* would appear to refer to some specific text. See the detailed summary of the discussion in Bienaimé, "L'annonce" 418–431. The choice of the texts from Ezekiel and Zechariah (see interpretation) is determined both by the context and by the evidence that a link between them had already been made in pre-Christian times. See Grelot, "Jean VII,38: eau du rocher" 43–51. For the later rabbinic combination of these ideas see *t. Sukk.* 3:18.

38. *out of his heart*: There is some discussion whether the expression *ek tēs koiliās autou* means out of the heart or out of the belly. This is further complicated by the possibility that the Aramaic word *gūph* may lie behind the Greek, with possible reference to the rock of the wilderness or the rock of the Temple. For a documented survey of the discussion see Brown, *Gospel* 1:323–324. The basic meaning demanded by the context is that living waters flow from within Jesus. For Cory, “Wisdom’s Rescue” 100–102, the theme of water comes from a wisdom background.
39. *this he said about the Spirit*: As well as the Jewish material provided in the interpretation, the same link between the gift of the water and the gift of the Spirit is found in *j. Sukk.* 55a; *Ruth Rab.* 4:8. See the excellent collection of texts, and commentary on them, in Manns, *Le symbole* 220–232.
42. *comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was*: It is not certain whether the use of Mic 5:2 as a prophecy about the birthplace of the Messiah is of Jewish or Christian origin. It is here presumed for the story of Jesus. See Lindars, *Gospel* 303. For greater detail on the question of Jesus’ birthplace see R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*. 2nd ed. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1993, 513–516.
45. *The officers then went back*: The distance in time between the sending of the officers “about the middle of the feast” (v. 32) and their return “on the last day of the feast” (v. 45) has led some (e.g., Brown, *Gospel* 1:325) to regard their reappearance as artificial. This arrangement is called for so that the officers can come back to the authorities impressed by the word of Jesus. They have been listening to what both Jesus and his interlocutors have said from v. 32 to v. 44 (see Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 2:159).
47. *The Pharisees answered them*: This is one of the several places in the Gospel where the roles of “the Pharisees” and “the Jews” are identical. The Pharisees are united (cf. v. 48) in their rejection of Jesus and their commitment to the Law (cf. v. 49). In v. 32 the chief priests and the Pharisees sent the officers to arrest Jesus. In v. 45 the officers return to the chief priests and the Pharisees, but only the Pharisees speak in vv. 47–52. What was said of “the Jews” in the introduction applies to “the Pharisees.”
48. *Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees*: The irony in vv. 48–49 depends on the Greek. Verse 48 is an affirmation of the rock-solid agreement of Jewish leadership in their rejection of the word of Jesus: *mē tis ek tōn archontōn . . . ē ek tōn Pharisaiōn*.
49. *this crowd, who do not know the Law*: “The Jews” or other members of the Jewish leadership (chief priests and Pharisees) have never shown signs of being receptive to the word of Jesus. This has happened only with the people and certain Jerusalemites, but now some of the Temple officers are falling victim to Jesus’ deception. They are told they are joining the ignorant and accursed ones, that part of the people that does not know the Law. This section of the Jewish population was known as “the people of the Land” (*‘am ha’āreš*), and was looked down upon by the political and religious authorities of Judaism.

See Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* 103–105; Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 2:160.

are accursed: Those accused by the authorities as ignorant and accursed accept the word of Jesus. The authorities exclude themselves from all discussion of Jesus as Messiah. The members of the Johannine community, expelled from the synagogue because of their acceptance of Jesus as the Christ (cf. 9:22; 12:42), recognize the irony. See Martyn, *History and Theology* 90–100; Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* 101–105.

50. *Nicodemus . . . who was one of them*: The claim of the Pharisees in v. 48, *mē tis . . . ek tōn Pharisaiōn*, is ironically rendered untrue as Nicodemus is described in 3:1 as an *archōn* of the Jews, and further described as *heis ōn ex autōn*. The security of the claim that "none of them" has listened to Jesus is disturbed by "one of them." For Cory, "Wisdom's Rescue" 107, Nicodemus plays a role from the wisdom tale: a helper who attempts to intervene on behalf of the protagonist.

51. *Does our law judge people*: Most commentators regard Nicodemus' question as a mere wondering about which detail of the Law is being used to judge Jesus. Deuteronomy 1:16–17; 17:4; Exod 23:1; Josephus, *Ant.* 6:6.3; 14:167; *War* 1:209, and *Exod. Rab.* 21:3 are cited to respond to Nicodemus' question (e.g., Bauer, *Johannesevangelium* 115). But none of these examples responds adequately to Nicodemus' question concerning *both* hearing what he has to say for himself *and* coming to know what he does. Thus there is no legislation that corresponds to his objection.

without first giving them a hearing to know what they are doing?: In the Fourth Gospel "to hear" and "to know what he does" are intimately associated with the revelation of God in and through the word and actions of Jesus. See Pancaro, *Law in the Fourth Gospel* 138–157. Pancaro concludes: "Jesus no longer appears as a violator of the Law, but as the one who fulfils it (cf. Jn 7:21–23). Jn brings this home in 7,51 by having the Law of the Jews establish conditions for the judgement of Jesus which can be met only by those who believe on him" (p. 156; emphasis in original). See also Pancaro, "The Metamorphosis of a Legal Principle" 340–361; Léon-Dufour, *Lecture* 2:243–246.

52. *no prophet is to rise from Galilee*: On the strange ignorance of the Pharisees concerning prophets who come from Galilee see Westcott, *Gospel* 125. Perhaps in light of this lapse on the part of the Pharisees, but most likely as a result of an assimilation of v. 40, some early readings (P^{66.75}) have "the prophet" (*ho prophētēs*). This is accepted by Mehlmann, "Propheta a Moyse promissus" 79–88, and Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 2:161.

Excursus on John 7:53–8:11: The Woman Taken in Adultery

7:53. They went separately to their own houses, 8:1. but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2. Early in the morning he came again to the Temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them.

3. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4. they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" 6a. This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.
6b. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." 8. And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 9. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10. Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11. She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from this moment on do not sin again."

INTERPRETATION

For sound textual reasons it is universally admitted that the account of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery (7:53–8:11) does not belong to the Fourth Gospel (cf. Brown, *Gospel* 1:332–338; Barrett, *Gospel* 589; Pickering, "John 7:53–8:11" 6–7). As this commentary is dedicated to an analysis of the dynamic of the Johannine narrative, John 7:53–8:11 is regarded as an intrusion. This popular ancient tradition about Jesus, which "floated" in written Jesus material, was incorporated into various manuscripts at different places in early textual traditions, mainly in the Fourth Gospel (after 7:36; 7:44; 7:52; or 21:25), but also in Luke (after Luke 21:38). Scribes were rightly anxious to preserve this remarkable story in its written form, and a place had to be found for it. It finally settled after John 7:52 as most copyists apparently thought it created least disturbance at that point of the Johannine narrative (cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary* 187–190; Becker, *Jesus und die Ehebrecherin* 25; Blank, "Frauen" 83; Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 3:171). But this synoptic-like story, which does not relate to the broader context of the Gospel and interrupts the already complex thought of 7:1–8:59, disturbs the storyteller's systematic account of Jesus' presence at the feasts of "the Jews" (despite Heil, "The Story of Jesus" 182–191, and "A Rejoinder" 361–366. cf. note to v. 1). "It is certain that this narrative is not an original part of the gospel" (Barrett, *Gospel* 589). However, given the value of John 7:53–8:11 as a witness to Jesus of Nazareth, its role within the accepted biblical tradition and in the life, liturgy, and imagination of Christians, a brief treatment of the passage is called for.

The interaction among the different characters in the narrative produces the following literary shape:

- (a) *Introduction* (7:53–8:2). An unspecified crowd and Jesus are separated, but the following day Jesus and “all the people” are in the Temple. Jesus teaches them.
- (b) *The Scribes and Pharisees and Jesus* (8:3–6a). The Scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus by asking what he has to say about a woman who has been taken in adultery.
- (c) *Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees* (8:6b–9). The challenge is reversed as Jesus asks the one without guilt to cast the first stone, and the Scribes and Pharisees and probably “all the people” depart.
- (d) *Jesus and the Woman* (8:10–11). For the first time the woman becomes an active character, drawn into the action by a question from Jesus who does not condemn but gives life.

The movement from the setting into the reversal of roles between Jesus and his interlocutors culminating in the dialogue between Jesus and the woman is a finely constructed and unified narrative (cf. McDonald, “The So-Called” 422–423). It provides a striking account of an event that probably has its roots in a memory of an event from the ministry of Jesus (cf. Becker, *Jesus und die Ehebrecherin* 174; Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 3:170–171).

Introduction (7:53–8:2). Jesus is isolated from the crowd as they go to their homes and he to the Mount of Olives (7:53–8:1). This is a Lukan touch, as often in Luke’s Gospel Jesus withdraws on his own for prayer before major events (e.g., Luke 4:42; 6:12; 9:18; 11:1; 21:37–38; 22:39–46). A new day begins with the assembly of “all the people” in the Temple being taught by Jesus (v. 2). There are again echoes of Jesus’ teaching role in the Gospel of Luke, after a night on the Mount of Olives (Luke 21:38). A large gathering in the Temple attentive to Jesus’ teaching is the setting for the action that follows.

The Scribes and Pharisees and Jesus (vv. 3–6a). The Scribes and Pharisees lead a woman who had been caught in adultery into the gathering of Jesus and the attentive crowd. The woman has been “caught” (*kateilēmenēn*) in adultery. She has been taken *in flagranti*, seized while actively involved sexually with a partner who was not her husband. This detail adds drama to the narrative as they set her in the middle of Jesus and the crowd (v. 3). In a situation of considerable distress, half-clad, and aware that she is facing death, the woman is of no concern to the Scribes and Pharisees. They accuse her and challenge Jesus (vv. 4–5). In a way reminiscent of “the Jews” in the Fourth Gospel they know what Moses would do in such a situation (v. 5a; cf. 6:30–31; 9:29), but they are anxious to place Jesus in a situation where he may appear to be in conflict with Moses and the Law. This is the point of their question: “What do you say about her?” (v. 5b), indicating a contrived use of the woman to pit the

judgment of Jesus against the teaching of Moses. To clarify this the narrator adds: "They said this to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him" (v. 6a). They are not interested in either the fate of the woman or the injured husband who is never mentioned, but in the possibility of finding fault with Jesus. The polemic is strong and very public (cf. v. 2: "all the people"), and the woman is but a trapping in the conflict. There is a process in place: Jesus is being challenged by the Law of Moses and the woman's public, and possibly tragic, exposure is an excuse to debate the Law. She is being instrumentalized for the purposes of the Scribes and Pharisees "that they might have some charge to bring against him" (v. 6a).

Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees (vv. 6b-9). It is impossible to identify the precise purpose of Jesus' bending down and writing with his finger on the ground (v. 6b). It is even more impossible to guess what he might have written. In the face of this challenge from the Scribes and Pharisees, where the accused woman has become a chattel in a legal debate, it is best understood as a sign of indifference, and even disappointment with the proceedings. Jesus turns away from this dramatic scene and ignores the question asked of him. These are the touches, however well elaborated in the tradition, that tell of an event from the life of Jesus. There is no need to resort to symbolic interpretations (cf. note). But as the Scribes and Pharisees continue to ask their question (v. 7a) Jesus resumes a standing position, entering the debate as he reestablishes communication, insisting that the one without sin cast the first stone (v. 7b; cf. Lev 24:1-16; Deut 13:10; 17:2-7). Although Jesus' challenge is not explicitly stated, it is most likely that it refers to sin in the sexual area. Having challenged those who have challenged him, he resumes his position, doodling in the dust (v. 8). Unwatched, as Jesus bends to the ground, the Scribes and Pharisees drift away, one by one. Nothing is said of the people. They may also have departed, leaving Jesus alone with the woman (v. 9). None of them can lay claim to be without such sin, and their departure in order of seniority is a chain reaction in which the exit of the most significant Jewish leader leads to departure of the next in line until all have disappeared. One can only speculate about the historical possibilities of such an order of events (cf. Schnackenburg, *Gospel* 2:167), but the gradual disappearance of the accusers, who have now become the accused, and probably also "all the people," is a striking way of leaving Jesus alone with the sinful woman. As Augustine states it: "Only two remain, the wretched woman and the incarnation of mercy" (*In Iohannis Evangelium* 33:5; CCSL XXXVI, 309: *Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia*).

Jesus and the Woman (vv. 10-11). Jesus' words to the woman, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (v. 10: *oudeis se katekrinen?*) are the first words addressed to the woman in the story. She is addressed

as "you" (*se*) and is now no longer an object, a necessary evil, but someone who can enter into a relationship with Jesus. Addressing him as "Lord" (*kyrie*), displaying her reverence for him, she tells Jesus that no one condemns her (v. 11a). On the basis of the relationship that is established by this dialogue Jesus can challenge her to sin no more. From this moment on (*apo tou nun*), the moment of her encounter with Jesus, he offers her the double possibility of a new life: "Go, and from this moment on do not sin again" (cf. note). The men (Scribes and Pharisees) in the earlier part of the story would not even allow her physical life. That has been restored to her through the intervention of Jesus. But the command to sin no more offers her the possibility of a newness of life in a right relationship with God.

Conclusion. Although it plays no role in the Johannine account of Jesus' presence in Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles (cf. 7:1-10:21), this passage is an ancient and precious witness to Jesus of Nazareth. It has no doubt been shaped into its present form in the storytelling tradition of the early Church (cf. Ehrmann, "Jesus and the Adulteress" 24-44; McDonald, "The So-Called" 416-420), but at least three issues point to its association with the life of Jesus: the punishment for adultery was discussed in the time of Jesus (cf. Mark 10:2; 12:15; Matt 22:35; Luke 10:25. For the discussion, cf. Blank, "Frauen" 86); second, Jesus opposes the traditional defenders of the Mosaic tradition; and third, on his own authority he unconditionally forgives a sinner. Jesus stands traditional values upside down if adherence to such values means that a woman is made a chattel, in this case a necessary evil in a debate over a point of the Law (cf. Moloney, *Woman* 8-25; Blank, "Frauen" 89-91). Maria Boulding's commentary on this episode is worth recording:

The Pharisees are tense, but he is calm and relaxed throughout; he accepts the woman openly and lovingly, as an adult and as a person. He has a sureness of touch; he can handle the situation and the relationship with her because he has nothing to be afraid of in himself. . . . He must have completely accepted and integrated his own sexuality. Only a man who has done so, or at least begun to do so, can relate properly to women. (D. Rees and Others, *Consider Your Call. A Theology of Monastic Life Today*. London: SPCK, 1978, 169. Cf. also McDonald, "The So-Called" 426-427).

NOTES

7:53. *They went separately to their own houses:* It is difficult to be certain whether this indication is a scribal attempt to associate the following passage with the immediately preceding passage, or whether it is a remnant of an original larger narrative setting. On the basis of the textual evidence the latter is more likely