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AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL

PROF. F. F. BRUCE, D.D.

II. Jesus Reveals Himself to the World (John 1:19-12:50)

(d) MINISTRY OF JESUS IN JERUSALEM (John 7:1-10:39)

(ii) *The 'Pericope Adulterae'* (John 7:53-8:11)

Ch. 7, v. 53—*And they went every man unto his own house.*—The twelve verses from John 7:53 to 8:11 are placed within square brackets in R.V. and relegated to a footnote in R.S.V. While they record an undoubtedly genuine incident which took place during one of Jesus' visits to Jerusalem, and may well be accepted as part of Holy Writ, the textual evidence indicates that they did not originally belong to this context, or indeed to this Gospel. The great majority of our ancient authorities for the text omit them, while a number of later authorities which contain them mark them in such a way as to imply that there was some doubt about their position. Where they do appear, they exhibit an unusually high proportion of variant readings. The first authorities to contain them belong to the 'Western' type of text. One manuscript inserts them after John 7:36; a few put them after John 21:24, while one important family of manuscripts has them after Luke 21:38. This last position was a natural one to give these verses, when we consider the similarity between Luke 21:37 f. and John 8:1 f. Although we cannot suppose that they originally formed part of Luke's Gospel any more than of John's, the editors who placed them at the end of Luke 21 were probably quite near the mark in their judgment about the setting of the story in the ministry of Jesus. It was no doubt a desire not to let such a valuable narrative be lost that attempts were made to preserve it by attaching it to one of the Gospels. It is thought by some scholars that they originally belonged to the 'Gospel according to the Hebrews'—a Jewish-Christian Gospel current in the early centuries A.D.—largely on the strength of a statement by Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* III. 39: 17) that Papias (bishop of Hierapolis c. A.D. 125, and author of an *Exposition of our Lord's Oracles*)

'sets forth another narrative, concerning a woman who was accused before the Lord of many sins—a narrative contained in the Gospel according to the Hebrews'. But the identification of the two narratives is precarious, the woman of John 7:53—8:11 was not accused of *many* sins.

Ch. 8, v. 1—*but Jesus went unto the mount of Olives.*—This probably fixes the incident at some point in the course of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem, during which, according to Luke 21:37, 'every day he was teaching in the temple; and every night he went out, and lodged in the mount . . . of Olives.'

v. 2—*And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.*—We may compare Luke 21:38, 'And all the people came early in the morning to him in the temple, to hear him.' Many scribes had regular teaching-pitches in the Outer Court, where they sat and expounded the law to their pupils; and Jesus evidently did the same on His later visits to Jerusalem.

v. 3—*And the scribes and the Pharisees bring a woman taken in adultery; and having set her in the midst.*—The expression 'scribes and Pharisees' is common in the Synoptic Gospels, but is not Johannine, indeed, the very term 'scribes' is not found in John's Gospel. Among the scribes and Pharisees here would be members of the Sanhedrin, whose responsibility it was to deal with this grave breach of the law.

v. 4—*they say unto him, Master, this woman hath been taken in adultery, in the very act.*—'Master' (Gk. *didaskalos*, 'teacher') probably reflects the Hebrew *Rabbi* (cf. John 1:38, 49; 3:2). If she was caught red-handed, how had her guilty partner been allowed to escape? His absence from the scene goes to show that these scribes and Pharisees were not so concerned about seeing that justice was done as in confronting Jesus with an embarrassing situation.

v. 5—*Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such.*—From the reference to stoning it has sometimes been thought that she must have been betrothed but not yet married: in Deut. 22:23 f. stoning is prescribed as the punishment for a betrothed

virgin who is unfaithful to her bridegroom, as well as for her paramour. But in Deut. 22:22, as in Lev. 20:10, the death penalty is laid down for all unfaithful wives and their paramours, and although stoning is not expressly mentioned, it is probably implied as the mode of execution. In fact, it appears that by the first century A.D. the full rigour of the law was no longer applied as a general rule, in urban communities at any rate. But the ancient law prevails in all its severity in less sophisticated areas of the Near East to the present day. Thus the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* for April 1958, quoting the Italian periodical *Oriente Moderno*, reports: 'Two Muslim pilgrims returning from Mecca, found in *flagranti* guilty of adultery on July 11, 1957, were taken to the judge in Mecca and sentenced to death by stoning. The sentence was executed on July 12, the Mufti himself casting the first stone.'

what then sayest thou of her?—The phrase 'of her' is not found in the majority of our authorities for this passage; it is absent from A.V. The question was a challenge to Jesus both religiously and politically—religiously, because if He showed Himself more lenient than Moses, He could be charged with setting at naught the sacred scriptures; politically, because if He gave an independent ruling on the matter, He could be charged with usurping jurisdiction which Roman law had expressly reserved to the Sanhedrin. (While the Sanhedrin could not execute the death penalty without Roman approval, according to John 18:31, they had the right to pronounce the death sentence for capital offences against Jewish law.)

v. 6—*And this they said, tempting him, that they might have whereof to accuse him.*—To accuse Him, that is to say, before the Roman governor; and had He appeared to interfere with their legally safeguarded prerogatives the accusation might have been sustained.

But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground.—The italicized clause which is added in A.V.—'as though he heard them not'—is an unwarranted insertion. T. W. Manson suggested that in writing on the ground He was imitating the

action of a Roman magistrate, who wrote down his sentence and then read it out aloud. If that is so, the words which He traced out would be those which He utters in v. 7. But on this, the only occasion when He is recorded as having written anything, what He wrote, like the purpose of His writing, must remain a matter of conjecture; and the writing would quickly have been rendered illegible.

v. 7—*But when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.*—In cases of execution by stoning, the ancient prescription ran, ‘The hand of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people’ (Deut. 17:7). Jesus makes no modification in the Mosaic law which had demanded death by stoning for the type of offence which this woman had committed, He simply rules that only those who were guiltless in this regard themselves could with any propriety undertake the responsibility of carrying out the sentence. No exception could be taken to His ruling — but in practice it made it impossible for the execution to be carried out. ‘Without sin’ probably has reference to the particular category of sin with which the woman was charged. We may remember His own words about adultery as consisting in the lustful look and not merely in the overt act (Matt. 5:28), but more was involved in His ruling than that. The law dealt more severely with women than with men. For a betrothed or married woman to have sexual relations with a man other than her bridegroom or husband was a capital offence; for a married man to have such relations with another woman than his wife was a relatively venial offence, provided that the woman was not another man’s wife. It was possible for men to maintain public respectability in spite of certain irregular incidents in their lives; Jesus’ ruling therefore came as a challenge to the conscience of each man who listened to Him. The embarrassment was no longer His, but theirs. His ruling about adultery, like His ruling elsewhere about divorce, involves a redressing of the unequal balance in the interests of the underprivileged sex. But by His appeal to the consciences or

the judges, He takes the question off the judicial plane altogether and raises it to the moral level—in accordance with His regular attitude and teaching.

v. 8—*And again, he stooped down and with his finger wrote on the ground.*—The phrase ‘with his finger’ is found only in Codex D and a few other authorities, Greek and Latin; the Received Text, followed by A.V., omits it. Some manuscripts amplify the second clause thus: ‘. . . wrote on the ground the sins of each one of them.’

v. 9—*And they, when they heard it, went out one by one, beginning from the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the midst.*—The phrase ‘being convicted by their own conscience’, found in the Received Text and A.V., no doubt represents the true situation, even if it is not part of the original text of the passage. The phrase ‘even unto the last’ does not appear in a number of authorities for the text; if it is omitted, the meaning may be not that they went out in order of age, but that the elders (members of the Sanhedrin) went out first and after them the scribes, (some of whom, not being members of the Sanhedrin, would be present as experts on the interpretation of the law).

v. 10—*And Jesus lifted up himself, and said unto her, Woman, where are they? did no man condemn thee?*—Not until all the woman’s accusers had departed did Jesus look up from His writing on the ground. His ruling on who was entitled to throw the first stone was sufficient to convict them; He would not embarrass them more than was necessary by looking them in the eye. Here again, the A.V., following the Received Text, exhibits a fuller reading by adding ‘and saw none but the woman’ after ‘lifted up himself’, and ‘thine accusers’ after ‘where are they’. There is nothing discourteous about His addressing the woman as ‘Woman’; He addressed His mother in the same way in John 2:4.

v. 11—*And she said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said, Neither do I condemn thee: go thy way; from henceforth sin no more.*—In her address to Him, ‘Lord’ may simply be ‘Sir’ (Gk. *kyrie*),

there is no suggestion that she knew who He was. His words, 'Neither do I condemn thee', may have led to the insertion of the incident at this point in the Gospel because of their similarity to 'I judge no man' in verse 15. Evidently He accepts her accusers' charge against her as true; His refusal to condemn her does not imply that she was not guilty of adultery, but He 'came not to judge the world, but to save the world' (John 12:47; cf. 3:17). He discharges the sinner without condoning her sin; with His command to her not to go on sinning we may compare His similar command to the man who was healed at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:14).

(To be continued)

THE LITTLE PSALTER

II. The Songs of the Pilgrims

A. NAISMITH

Undoubtedly the fifteen 'Songs of Degrees' were chanted by pilgrims on their way from rural districts to Jerusalem to worship God, and by the exiles returning from the Provinces of the Persian Empire in which they had been eating the 'bitter bread of banishment'. This return, Jeremiah had prophesied, would commence seventy years after Nebuchadnezzar led them captive to Babylon; and Daniel, a keen student of prophecy who had prayed earnestly for the fulfilment of that prediction (Dan. 9:1-19), lived till after the first band of pilgrims wended its way back to Jerusalem. While we may be sure that they sang at each stage of their journey all the fifteen songs of ascents, and probably many other Psalms as well, we cannot fail to observe that definite progressive sentiment and experience are embodied in the five triads of these Pilgrim Songs. The first triad is plainly appropriate to the commencement of their pilgrimage, when the element of anticipation was strongest, the fifth and last to the conclusion and the realisation of their hopes and desires.