

# Notes and Comments

## PERICOPE ADULTERAE

“IN THE NEW TESTAMENT,” writes Gordon Robinson, “there are some tantalizing puzzles to which the imagination keeps returning in search of a solution.”<sup>1</sup> The *pericope adulterae* of John 8: 1–11 is one of these. Many suggestions have been made as to what words, if any, Jesus might have written. Some scholars<sup>2</sup> have suggested that he wrote the names of every man and beside each name he wrote the sin that the man had committed (Jer. 17: 13). Others have believed that in writing with his finger on the ground Jesus was simply making the gesture of one who was absorbed in something else.<sup>3</sup> Still others have said that the woman having been caught *in flagrante delicto* probably stood before him naked and he averted his eyes from gazing at her. At least one scholar<sup>4</sup> thinks this writing on the ground was an imitation by Jesus of the Roman judges who first wrote down the sentence before reading it out. Jesus is in effect saying, since you want to trap me by making me usurp the function of a Roman judge then I shall write out the sentence as they do. One of the most recent commentators says: “It is fruitless to ask what Jesus wrote on the ground; he simply refuses to pass judgment.”<sup>5</sup> It may be that the real clue to what Jesus wrote is to be found in the suggestion of A. J. Gossip: “Perhaps something that broke through their guard, and reached and aroused their consciences. In any case they slipped away, *beginning with the eldest, till not one remained.*”<sup>6</sup>

In bringing this woman to Jesus and asking him the question: “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say?” the scribes and Pharisees were laying a trap. If he found her guilty, they would accuse him of usurping the power of Rome; if he let her go free, they would accuse him of breaking the law of Moses. This trap is typical of others in which his enemies sought to ensnare him (e.g., Mark 10: 1–12; 12: 13 ff.; 12: 18 ff.; etc.). Jesus avoided the dilemma by writing in the dust. What did he write? It is a fairly safe conjecture to say that he wrote some text of scripture. Perhaps the proper question to ask is: what incident, if any, from the scripture would remind Jesus of this situation in which he now found himself? Was there any precedent? We know from the Gospel records that Jesus had an unerring instinct for selecting the appropriate passage of scripture when in dialogue with his opponents. We may assume in this case also that he would go straight to a biblical passage which would be illuminating to the situation, one which, as Dr. Gossip has reminded us, would break through their guard and reach and arouse their consciences. What are the elements in this situation which could

1. G. Robinson, *New Testament Detection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 211.

2. E. G. C. R. Gregory, in *Expository Times*, 10 (1898–99), 193f.

3. W. Leonard, in B. Orchard (ed.), *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London: Nelson, 1953), 997.

4. A. M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to John* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), 200. Hunter attributes this insight to T. W. Manson.

5. C. K. Barrett, in M. Black (ed.), *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London: Nelson, 1962), 868.

6. A. J. Gossip, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VIII (New York–Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), p. 593.

be the determining factors in the choice on Jesus' part of such a passage? There are adultery, dilemma, Mosaic law, elders, and judgment. Is there any passage in the Old Testament which embodies all, or most of these elements? There is the account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39) but it is not appropriate because the accused in this instance is a man and furthermore many of the other elements are not present. What about David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11)? This is admittedly a closer parallel but again not close enough to embody all the elements noted above. We will search the Old Testament scriptures in vain for any situation which might serve as a precedent or parallel to this situation in which Jesus found himself. It is little wonder then that C. K. Barrett has said that this is a fruitless question.

But must we confine our investigation to the Old Testament? There are other scriptures which were well known in Jesus' time and from which he might have drawn in order to save this woman and himself in this dilemma. I am referring to the Apocrypha. Indeed Jesus' use of the Apocrypha may well have been one of the reasons why the early church came to include it in its canon. Here, it seems to me, the story of Susanna is particularly appropriate. Let us examine it to see if it does indeed fit the facts of this situation. Susanna is accused of adultery in the very act as is this woman. Susanna was also faced with a dilemma: "Susanna sighed deeply, and said, 'I am hemmed in on every side. For if I do this thing, it is death for me; and if I do not, I shall not escape your hands'" (v. 22). Jesus faces a similar dilemma. In both stories also, there is an appeal to the law of Moses. Susanna is condemned to death "in accordance with the law of Moses" (v. 62); Jesus is asked to judge this woman according to the Mosaic law (v. 5). The "elders" play a prominent role in both these stories. Moreover in both instances the element of "judgment" is a prominent feature. The word *Daniel* in Hebrew means "God has judged." If this is the key to unlocking this tantalizing puzzle then what did Jesus write? I suggest that he wrote the text found in v. 5: "Iniquity came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges, who were supposed to govern the people." It has been noted by commentators that this unknown text may be an allusion to Jer. 23: 14-15. The weakness, however, in pursuing the suggestion that Jesus might have written down the words of Jeremiah is that there is no mention of "elders" in the Jeremiah passage. It is this *apo tōn presbuterōn* which I suggest is the *crux interpretum* of this puzzling incident. This explains why it was that "they went away beginning with the *eldest*." The text would immediately bring to their minds the story of Susanna, the beautiful wife of Joakim, who was falsely accused of adultery by the two Jewish elders of Babylon. Their own consciences too would be smitten when they recalled the lecherous looks of the two elders as they spied on Susanna as she bathed. They too, no doubt, had cast lustful eyes on the naked body of this woman since they claim to have caught her in the very act (*moicheia kateilēmnenēn*). Or could it be that this daughter of Israel, like Susanna, was in fact being falsely accused? It is significant that Jesus does not condemn her, though he does tell her not to sin again. Finally, they could not fail to remember also the fate of the two elders after their cross-examination by the young Daniel. Perhaps they too feared that the trial which they had gloatingly begun would end in disastrous consequences to themselves. In the words of Shakespeare this woman like Shylock might yet live to cry out:

A Daniel come to judgment! yea, A Daniel!  
O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!<sup>7</sup>

7. *The Merchant of Venice*, IV, i, 222.

Could it be that this mystery in the *pericope adulterae* is now solved with the help of this first and greatest of all detective stories: Susanna?

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## JOHN STRACHAN ON CHURCH AND STATE: TWO LETTERS TO WILLIAM EWART GLADSTONE

### I

WILLIAM EWART GLADSTONE was both a mighty political force in nineteenth-century England and one of the most eminent Anglican laymen of his time. In an era of increasing discomfort in Church-State relations, he was inevitably drawn—sometimes on his own initiative, sometimes by the impetuosity of others—into a succession of ecclesiastico-political controversies. Consequently, his published writings and speeches and private papers are an important source for the ecclesiastical history of the Victorian age. In two earlier contributions to this *Journal*<sup>1</sup> I have used unpublished materials from the "Gladstone Papers" to elucidate the views and policies of a great Anglican bishop of nineteenth-century New Brunswick, with special reference to the ecclesiastical politics of the day. In this note I propose to draw on the same source for illustrations of the outlook of John Medley's outstanding "Upper Canadian" colleague, John Strachan.

The first Bishop of Toronto was born a quarter of a century before the first Bishop of Fredericton, and his mind was formed by the older High Churchmanship rather than by the Oxford Movement. Naturally enough, then, through a great part of his career he held and expressed views both on the Anglican Establishment and on "Popery" and "Dissent" which the Tractarian Medley, sceptical of formal establishments and appreciative of the practical achievements of Roman Catholics and Nonconformists, must have found unrealistic.<sup>2</sup> It is his outspoken advocacy of these views that has made Strachan the leading devil of Ontario Protestant demonology.

But in reality he was never a mere defender of hierarchical or denominational privilege. Even the old-fashioned (and very unecumenical) language of the first letter printed below expresses, not a naked claim to power, but an honest conviction of the truth of the Anglican position and of the significance of the Anglican Establishment for the common welfare of the "British Dominions."<sup>3</sup> In later years, when the cause of ecclesiastical establishments has

1. "John Medley on Irish Church Disestablishment: An Unpublished Letter," *CJT*, 7 (1961), 198-200; "John Medley as Defender of 'Ritualism': An Unpublished Correspondence," *CJT*, 8 (1962), 208-11.

2. Cf. E. R. Fairweather, "A Tractarian Patriarch: John Medley of Fredericton," *CJT*, 6 (1960), 15-24.

3. For these reasons Strachan was enthusiastic about Gladstone's early book, *The State in its Relations with the Church* (1st ed., London, 1838). At Strachan's Primary Visitation (September 10, 1841) the clergy of his diocese unanimously adopted a resolution commending Gladstone's work; a copy sent to Gladstone is in British Museum Add. MS. 44,358 (Gladstone Papers, Vol. 273), fol. 129. For Gladstone's early views on the subject, cf. A. R. Vidler, *The Orb and the Cross* (London: S.P.C.K., 1945).