

“Mary the Hairdresser”

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John 8:2-11

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 women. So what do you say?”

⁶ This they said to test Him, that they might have some charge to bring against Him. 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 on the ground. ⁹ But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

¹⁰ Jesus stood 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 now on sin no more.” [ESV]

Mary the Hairdresser

This week, we continue to view Jesus Christ through the eyes of those with whom He had personally interacted. They were all real people. This time, it’s all about a humble hairdresser.

On the surface, it appears to be a demonstration of simple Grace. Behind the scenes, however, there were conspiracies, plottings, manipulations, all pointing to an attempt to discredit Christ. In other words, the story is much larger than just about the forgiveness of a condemned woman. According to the Talmud, her name was “Mary the Hairdresser,” a pawn in a much bigger game.

The story begins with Jesus in Jerusalem. Up until this time, He had been teaching and preaching in the region of Galilee. Now He had taken His ministry to the very heart of Judaism — the capital city Jerusalem. Not only that, He had come to the very core of the Jewish faith — the Temple — where He was teaching.

“Early in the morning He came again to the temple.” [John 8:2]

This little opening tidbit is more than merely trivial; it’s important to the whole story. The Temple was the place where sinners found forgiveness from God. Every morning and evening in a rite called “The Tamidh,” various animals and birds were slaughtered as repentant sinners confessed their sins over the innocent sacrificial victims which died in their place.

It was into these sacred precincts where Mary the Hairdresser, who had sinned, instead of finding the promised reconciliation, forgiveness, and acceptance with God, had been dragged for condemnation and execution. The place of redemption had become for her a place for summary slaughter.

She had been caught in the defiling bed of adultery. According to the Talmud, her husband’s name was Papus ben Judah, a member of the Sanhedrin. He was described as a very jealous man; she was described as a stunningly gorgeous woman.

In the Tractate Kethuboth, the collection of laws concerning marriage, divorce, and adultery,

the Talmudists report that Papus ben Judah was an abusive man who locked up his wife like a prisoner in her own house so that she could not speak to anyone.

However, she managed to escape her prison anyway. She met a lover, and fled to his embracing arms while Papus ben Judah was away at work.

This opened the door to the possibility of entrapping Jesus of Nazareth. Papus ben Judah, having discovered his wife's infidelity, in his wrath, secretly offered her up as a pawn in a power play to discredit this itinerant rabbi from Galilee.

The Sanhedrin, colluding with Papus, set up a sting operation. Surely enough, thinking it was safe, Mary used her stratagem to escape her prison once again, and fled to the welcoming arms of her paramour. The trap snapped shut on her.

The Temple guards burst in on them at the peak of their passion. Hauled out in their sinful nakedness, the Beth Din — the Sanhedrin — pronounced the inevitable verdict — death by stoning, as the Torah of Moses commanded.

Death by stoning is an ancient middle-eastern method of execution. The rules governing the process are precise. The condemned person is wrapped in a linen cloth, blindfolded, and arms and feet bound. Burying the person upright in a hole up to the chest, the executioners select specially shaped rocks — each about the size of a man's hand, flat, with a razor sharp edge. These were hurled at the victim's head until dead.

It's interesting that it was only Mary who was condemned to execution in this story. According to the Torah, both the adulterer and the adulteress were to be stoned. [Deuteronomy 22:24] But it is only Mary the Hairdresser who was hauled — wrapped, blindfolded, and bound — before Jesus. This suggests strongly that even the lover, within whose arms she had found what she believed was true romance, was a party to the plot. He had purposely seduced her to cause her condemnation and death at her jealous husband's vengeful, vindictive request. Papus and his colleagues believed they could literally kill two "birds" with one "stoning" — a profligate wife, and an irritating itinerant rabbi.

So they brought her — trembling, terrified, weeping, bound and blindfolded, waiting for the first stone to begin the process of dying — to the very place where she should have found forgiveness, and restoration — the Temple — at the time of the morning sacrifice for sins yet!

The trembling sinner lay in a helpless heap at Jesus' feet. Papus and his buddies made their accusations, based upon the legal demands of the Torah they were bound to uphold. The fact that the sinful adultery had been cunningly contrived and manipulated by their own machinations they hid in the background — or so they hoped. Hypocrisy is like that.

So they made their case before the itinerant rabbi from Galilee.

"Rabbi, this wretched wench was caught in the very act of adultery. Now, according to the Law of Moses, we are commanded to stone such. So! What do YOU say?" [John 8:4-5 JA]

John reported that this whole scenario was a ruse by which to ruin Jesus, so that they might bring some sort of charge against Him for defying the Laws of Moses. Jesus discerned that.

What He did next was straight out of the prophetic poetry of Judaism's premier prophet, Jeremiah.

"O Lord, the hope of Israel,
all who forsake you shall be put to shame;
those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth,
for they have forsaken the Lord,
the fountain of living water." [Jeremiah 17:13 ESV]

Jesus, enacting Jeremiah's prophetic word, began to write in the earth. Names! Deeds!

Motives! As this clutch of connivers continued to clamor their case, Jesus stood up and said to them, pointing to what was written in the earth...

“Whoever among you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone.” [John 8:7 JA]

Then He bent down and wrote in the earth some more. Having heard what He said, and after looking at the “dirt” His infallible finger had written about them in the literal “dirt,” they began to slink away in shame, beginning with the oldest to the youngest.

Finally, there was just the two of them — the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world acting in her defense at the moment of the morning sin offering, and the woman, the condemned sinner who needed that very atonement, Mary the hapless Hairdresser. Removing the blindfold and loosening the bindings that bound her, He helped her to her feet and asked simply...

“Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?”
[John 8:10 JA]

Looking around, blinking in the bright, morning sunlight, she answered...

“No one, Lord.” [John 8:11 JA]

The One who was the only one whose judgment ever really matters, pronounced His verdict on this flawed, sinful victim —

“Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” [John 8:11 ESV]

And so it happens for all of us!

“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather that the world through Him would be saved.” [John 3:17 JA]

“There is therefore now no condemnation against anyone who belongs to Christ Jesus.” [Romans 8:1 JA]

“...whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and He knows everything.” [1 John 3:20 ESV]

Yes, God knows our whole story — the abusing, accusing conniver who caused us to sin has been silenced in the blinding sunlight of the Grace of God lavished upon us in Jesus, God’s Son.