

Casting Stones at Laws Cast in Stone: A Christotelic Narrative of Biblical Law Revealed Through a Story of Trauma: John 8:1-11

Marisa J. Lapish

Introduction

In *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue*, neo-atheist author, philosopher, and neuroscientist, Sam Harris critiques fundamentalist religion by incriminating God's sacred texts: "Presumably, God could have written these books any way He wanted. And if He wanted them to be understood in the twenty-first century secular rationality, He could have left out all those bits about stoning people to death for adultery or witchcraft."¹

Lest the reader cast the first stone at extremist Islamist interpretations for such violent Qur'anic law codes, what rationale can be given for the God described in the Jewish and Christian scriptures whose literal toxic words echo the same violence? "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death."² Deuteronomy 22:22 repeats this death penalty sentence for adultery with its rationale: to purge the evil from Israel. The death penalty for adultery does not appear to be limited to the context of the Old Testament since centuries after this law code was given, teachers of the law still appeared to condone death by stoning for adultery in the New Testament.³

In this article, I will examine the toxic capital offense texts requiring the death penalty for adultery delineated in the legal documents of the Old Testament in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:20-22. To do this, I will first compare the Mosaic Law with the genre of other ancient Near East law codes. Secondly, I will demonstrate how Jesus revealed the meaning of those laws using a christotelic⁴, polyphonic interpretation of the account of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11 as a case law demonstration of his narratological legal hermeneutic of Matthew 5:27-28 for interpreting the Mosaic

¹ Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

² Leviticus 20:10 NIV.

³ John 8:1-5 NIV.

⁴ The term, "christotelic" was coined by Peter Enns to refer to a Christ-driven hermeneutic which, for the church, sees the Old Testament as a whole finding its consummation (telos) in Christ, with a trajectory continuing in the church today. See Peter Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving Beyond a Modernist Impasse," *WTJ* 65 (2003), 277.

Law Code. In conclusion, ethical implications for a restorative christotelic hermeneutic for community life in Church will be offered.

Background

The Mosaic decalogue contains the injunction “You shall not commit adultery”,⁵ but does not put forth a penalty for infraction. Both of the law passages in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:20-22 require the death penalty for adultery for both the man and the woman involved. Since Leviticus 20:1 literally states that this death-dealing legislation originated directly from the mouth of God to Moses, these laws disclose a disturbing portrayal of a God who demands the harsh, extreme, and irreversible retribution of death for offenses that do not seem to warrant death. God seems to be a “Deadly Lawgiver”, according to Seibert.⁶ Although the passage in Leviticus does not specify the execution method for the death penalty required for adultery, the context of the Deuteronomy passage suggests that stoning was the likely punishment for various types of sexual sin.⁷ Apparently, death by stoning seems to be indicated for purging impurity—spiritual or ceremonial—which causes serious damage to the community that cannot be compensated, repaired, or restored.⁸

Although the purity laws are scattered throughout the Pentateuch, “the ‘holiness code’, which defines holiness as purity, is found in Leviticus 17-26, with its central idea found in Leviticus 19:2: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”.⁹ This situates the death penalty for adultery in Leviticus 20:10 within the Hebrew purity code. Borg elaborates that “a purity system is a social system organized around the contrasts or polarities of pure and impure, clean and unclean”, which can be applied to people, based on birth as well as behavior.¹⁰ The law requiring the death penalty for adultery falls within the impure behavior category of the purity code, a behavior considered so seriously damaging as to warrant death by stoning.

Under Mosaic Law, Deuteronomy 17:6 indicates that two or three witnesses must testify at a trial before someone could be put to death by stoning. The purity of the group, not the individual, is at stake in this ancient Near East law code. The following verse amplifies the method and the reason: “the hands

⁵ Exodus 20:14 NIV.

⁶ Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 17.

⁷ Deuteronomy 22: 21, 24 NIV.

⁸ Exodus 19:10-15, 21:28-32; Leviticus 20:27, 24:16-23; Deuteronomy 17:2-5, 22:20-21 NIV.

⁹ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 63.

¹⁰ Borg, 50-51.

of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you”.¹¹ In other words, the witnesses must cast the first stones.

Flannagan asserts that comparing Leviticus and Deuteronomy with other ancient Near East law codes (Babylonian Hammurabi, Assyrian, Hittite, and Sumerian law codes) reflects the prevalent law genre of that era, all with ostensibly harsh penalties.¹² Flannagan cites Raymond Westbrook, an expert ancient Near East scholar, who claims that prescribed punishments were inconsistent with the law in actual practice within these cultures; laws served to demonstrate the gravity of the offense by extreme example of death penalty. These law codes reflected behavioral ideals as admonitions against serious abhorrent behaviors, but enforcement was not intended to be carried out. Westbrook, gives Old Testament examples which demonstrate the practice of “ransoming” in which courts would agree to a lesser penalty or monetary compensation as an option, where the more extreme penalty would not be taken literally nor carried out in practice.¹³ “The genre of the passages, in light of the common ancient Near Eastern legal practices and customs, suggests that most capital sanctions functioned as a kind of rhetorical denunciation, which expressed, in vivid form, a moral ideal. Further, in practice, a ransom was paid, and the punishment was not literally carried out; it was not statute law demanding the stoning of adulterers”.¹⁴

In his article entitled, “Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes”, Westbrook posits that Old Testament law codes show a reformulation of penal decisions as case law. The law codes do not represent a comprehensive corpus, but rather a collection of case laws demonstrating that law codes developed from precedents as part of the religious-historical narrative where the deity replaces the king as the source of the law. A familiar rule from the code of law was presented as an earlier precedent as a reference point, followed by a specific case decision and execution of the sentence of a particular case.¹⁵ An example of this is Deuteronomy 19:15-20, which references back to Deuteronomy 17:6 about the testimony of more than one witness being necessary to put someone to death by stoning. Deuteronomy 19:15-20 gives more elaboration if the case involves malicious witnesses giving false testimony. The sentence executed in that case, would issue the same penalty for the false witnesses as the accused: death by stoning. Furthermore, Eslinger cites Westbrook contrasting biblical law with other ancient Near

¹¹ Deuteronomy 17:7 NIV.

¹² Matthew Flannagan, “Stoning Adulterers,” *Christian Research Journal* 34, no. 06 (2011): 2.

¹³ Raymond Westbrook, “Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes,” *Revue Biblique* 92, no. 2 (1995): 247-264. Quoted in Matthew Flannagan, 2-4.

¹⁴ Flannagan, “Stoning Adulterers”, 4.

¹⁵ Westbrook, “Biblical and Cuneiform”, 257-263.

Eastern law in that “it contains the voice of dissent as much, if not more, than that of the establishment”.¹⁶ Westbrook’s research suggests that this narratological dissenting voice also manifests in the Mosaic law code.

Yale legal scholar, Robert Cover contends that all law codes locate in overarching narratives that reveal their meaning. He postulates, “For every constitution there is an epic, for every decalogue a scripture. Once understood in the context of the narratives that give it meaning, law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live”.¹⁷ Bartor identifies distinctives of a narrative reading of biblical law in the case laws of the Pentateuch. Both law and literature require language, rules for wording, and interpretation for the construction of reality. He describes a biblical narratological reading where “law is an arena in which human stories are presented”.¹⁸ Recent scholarly peer reviews of Westbrook’s work are compelling and challenge any dichotomy between law and narrative in the Old Testament texts, but rather, see story and legal praxis intertwined in the text, asserting that perhaps the contemporary categories of law and literature are misapplied to the Hebrew scriptures.¹⁹ If these insights about ancient Near East law codes, including the Mosaic Law, are correct, how might the case of the adulterous woman in John 8:1-11 demonstrate a nonliteral narrative interpretation of the Law?

Theological Literary Analysis of John 8:1-11

Significantly, the earliest Greek manuscripts of John’s gospel entirely omit the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. Yet, the passage is referred to and appears in the writings of early church fathers, including Augustine, who suggests why it was omitted in the minority of extant manuscripts. “Certain persons of little faith, or rather enemies of the true faith, fearing, I suppose, lest their wives should be given impunity in sinning, removed from their manuscripts the Lord’s act of forgiveness toward the adulteress, as if he who said, Sin no more, had granted permission to sin”.²⁰ Others question the placement of this story in the gospel of John, but N.T. Wright relates that it cannot be denied as a

¹⁶ Raymond Westbrook, “Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes,” *Revue Biblique* 92, no. 2 (1985): 247-264. Quoted in Lyle Eslinger, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108, no. 4 (1989): 686.

¹⁷ Robert Cover, “Nomos and Narrative,” *Narrative, Violence and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover*, eds. Martha Minnow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 95-96.

¹⁸ Assnat Bartor, “Reading Biblical Law as Narrative,” *Prooftexts* 32, no. 3 (2012): 292.

¹⁹ Chaya Halberstam, “The Art of Biblical Law,” *Prooftexts* 27, no. 2 (2007): 345.

²⁰ Augustine, *De Adulterinis Conjugiis* 2:6-7 trans. Charles T. Huegelmeier in *The Fathers of the Early Church: St. Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects* (New York: Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 107.

fitting introduction to a chapter which begins with people wanting to stone a woman to death and which ends with people wanting to stone Jesus to death.²¹

The scene takes place in the temple courts, likely the Women's Court, where both men and women were free to be, but women were not free to be beyond.²² With all the people gathered around him, Jesus sat down in authoritative posture to teach them, when the teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in the act of adultery, implying the presence of eyewitnesses.²³ They made her stand in front of the mob of people, accusing her of breaking the Mosaic Law against adultery which they say required death by stoning, and demanding a verdict from Jesus to "have a basis for accusing him".²⁴

These opening verses in the gospel narrative are enlightening to the background research explored, making it a New Testament example demonstrating a narrative reading of biblical law. In the John 8:1-8 case, a familiar rule of the Mosaic code of law, death penalty for adultery, was presented as a precedent for reference. Next, the teachers of the law state their case, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"²⁵ This seems to follow Westbrook's pattern for Mosaic Law interpretation.²⁶ Will Jesus set aside the law of Moses and forgive her sins as he had with other "impure" people, and in effect, teach others to ignore the Mosaic Law? As the Jewish Messiah, would he challenge the Roman Empire where it was the "Roman rulers who alone had authority to impose the death penalty"?²⁷ Is Jesus a literalist?

Sheridan shares a wise insight from the early church father, Origen, about the posture of reading Old Testament Law in light of the revelation of Jesus. "Therefore, Jesus reads the Law to us when he reveals the secret things of the Law. For we who are of the catholic Church do not reject the Law of Moses, but we accept it if Jesus reads it to us. For thus we shall be able to understand the Law correctly, if Jesus reads it to us, so that when he reads we may grasp his mind and understanding".²⁸ Fortunately, in the

²¹ N.T. Wright, *John for Everyone: Part One* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 111-112.

²² Watson E. Mills, *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 880.

²³ John 8:1-3 NIV.

²⁴ John 8:4-6 NIV.

²⁵ John 8:4-5 NIV.

²⁶ Westbrook, "Biblical and Cuneiform", 257-263.

²⁷ Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 96.

²⁸ Origen, *HomJos* 9.8; FC 105:104. Quoted in Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 105.

Sermon on the Mount, Jesus directly teaches how he reads the Mosaic Law concerning adultery in Matthew 5:27-28.

In this narrative context, Jesus reveals the kingdom of God interpretation of law that he describes in his Sermon on the Mount specifically concerning adultery in Matthew 5:27-28. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery [*Mosaic Law Code reference, inferring precedent cases in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:20-22 to which the teachers of the Law and Pharisees refer*] but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. [*Jesus’ interpretation to be applied casuistically as legal ethic*]” (emphases added). How does Jesus apply his interpretation of the law casuistically in bringing the just mercy of his kingdom to this mob situation with a woman accused of adultery?

Jesus displays kingly wisdom in the context of the book of John where the question of whether Jesus is the Messiah king is being revealed.²⁹ He does not reactively answer immediately; he unseats himself from his authoritative teaching posture and bends down low enough to the ground to write with his finger.³⁰ A silent, physical action rather than a reactant, verbal teaching is his immediate response. What is this action communicating? Rene Girard explains one possibility: “Jesus did not bend down in order to write, I believe, but he writes because he has bent down. Why has he bent down? In order not to look back at those people who look intently at him...he does his best to avoid even the slightest hint of visual provocation. If Jesus returned their looks, these people would probably read in his own eyes, as a mirror, the anger which is really theirs but which they would project against him.”³¹

Jesus seems to use silence and distraction to create relational space, diverting the collective wrath of the mob, thereby refusing to engage in complicity with the violence of either the accusatory religious purity culture or the prevailing violent culture of Empire. In this way, he resists the antagonism offered to him by their ideologies.³² Instead, he physically demonstrates a Third Way, which defines his nonviolent and alternative Kingdom of God. He resists and refuses the oppressive tactics of both the

²⁹ Wright, *John for Everyone*, 112.

³⁰ John 8:6 NIV.

³¹ Rene Girard, “The First Stone,” *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 52, issue 1 (1999): 15.

³² David Fitch, *The Church of Us vs. Them: Freedom from a Faith That Feeds on Making Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 169.

religious and political Empires.³³ “By declining to cooperate with the process, Jesus effectively breaks its momentum”.³⁴

What Jesus was writing with his finger on the ground has been a matter of conjecture for manifold sermons of early church fathers and contemporary preachers alike. Certainly, it was not the first time God used his finger to write about adultery, physical or spiritual, whether in stone or in dust.³⁵ Perhaps the gesture itself was an allusion to those Old Testament texts. Or, perhaps he was merely suspending time, giving space by “doodling” to discern the polyphony of voices in this scene as was his practice, and can be ours, by using a christocentric lens to break down multiple voices within this text.³⁶

Discursive Reflections

To use Jersak’s christocentric polyphonic approach as the “Jesus Way” of interpretation for this narrative, it is important to discern the various voices speaking in the text at hand as a revelation of the voices of sacrificial religion demanding retributive justice in contrast with the voice of self-giving love incarnate in Christ offering restorative justice.³⁷ Most of the voices of sacrificial religion crying out for punishment and sacrifice are evident from these initial six verses of the passages in John 8 discussed thus far. The voice of the accuser speaks through the teachers of the law and the Pharisees against the adulteress, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery”.³⁸ The voice of the Law demanding purity also speaks through the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, “In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say?”³⁹ These voices of sacrificial religion point accusatory fingers at both the accused woman and the Teacher they wish to entrap with regard to the law hermeneutics.⁴⁰ One voice is silent: the voice of the victim. And where is the voice of self-giving love to be heard?

Several issues arise from the accusations about the Mosaic Law, specifically concerning the precedent cases in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:20-22 that they seem to be referring to requiring the death penalty, the most obvious one being that both the man and the woman caught in the act of

³³ Fitch, 168-169.

³⁴ Robert Barron, “The Woman Caught in Adultery,” in *The Word on Fire Bible: The Gospels*, ed. Brandon Vogt (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2020), 510.

³⁵ Exodus 31:18; Jeremiah 17:13.

³⁶ Brad Jersak, “One Story, Two Revelations, Four Voices: Reading Biblical Narrative Christocentrically.” Accessed November 18, 2020. <https://www.clarion-journal.com/files/one-story-1.pdf>, 5-14.

³⁷ Jersak, 5-14.

³⁸ John 8:4 NIV.

³⁹ John 8:5 NIV.

⁴⁰ John 8:6 NIV.

adultery were to be put to death. Where was the man? Jewett states that the accusers “incidentally betrayed their prejudices in that they laid hold of the woman and not the man; *she* was the sinner who should be a test case”.⁴¹ In “The First Stone”, Girard declared that the woman was the scapegoat, the “expendable victim”, upon whom the accusers’ sacred violence rages as it “purges the community of its ‘impurities’”.⁴² The patriarchal purity culture of sacrificial religion was in rivalry against the One who embodied self-giving love for men *and* women equally.

Borg illuminates that the Jewish societal purity system was patriarchal. He states, “Purity and impurity also were associated with the contrast between male and female”.⁴³ In effect, this social system created sharp social boundaries between pure/impure, righteous/sinner—and male/female. Women were assumed to be men’s property, the initiators of temptation, and associated with Eve, sex, and sin. Wahlberg affirms the patriarchal bias in Jesus’ day as a “pre-judgment against any woman who committed a sexual sin. And in those days just as today, men were regarded less critically for sexual sins”.⁴⁴

Fitch views this narrative as demonstrating the patriarchal purity culture. “And so, although she stands before them, they ask Jesus a question about her as if she is not even present and does not count as a human being. They have made her into a depersonalized object and have distanced themselves from her so that they can aim their perverse anger at her”.⁴⁵ The woman is traumatized by the accusing mob and religious keepers of community purity. She is victimized and singled out for a sin shared by two people, treated as an “it”, a non-being, an enemy-other to be scapegoated because of sacrificial religion’s rivalrous voices mimetically desiring to entrap Jesus, the voice which speaks self-giving love.

As part two of the narrative begins again in John 8:7, the drama crescendos with the cacophonous mob of questioning accusers as the traumatized woman stands defenseless. Jesus straightens up to stand with her. Piercing the violent darkness with penetrating light, the Incarnate Word of God spoke words that divide soul and spirit, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.⁴⁶ “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her”.⁴⁷ Could this be the “dissenting voice” hidden in

⁴¹ Jewett, 96.

⁴² Girard, 11.

⁴³ Borg, 52.

⁴⁴ Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, *Jesus According to a Woman* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 20.

⁴⁵ Fitch, 168-169.

⁴⁶ Hebrews 4:12 NIV.

⁴⁷ John 8:7 NIV.

the Law, the voice of the voiceless victim, the oppressed minority voice being spoken by the One who suffers and stands with all suffering ones, giving His defense as a witness speaking life-giving love?

This co-suffering voice silences the accusatory voices of sacrificial religion, both the teachers of the Law and the Law itself. Interpreting law through the lens of a trauma reveals a court that silences witnesses. The Law reveals human beings to be traumatized both as violent victimizers and victims of violence—all are witnesses of violence, their own trauma and each other's trauma.⁴⁸ All are in need of trauma-informed healing and restoration. "The silence itself now becomes the witness that not only interrupts the legal process but also brings it to a halt. It is not only history that has been placed on trial; now the law itself must stand trial".⁴⁹ In this context, sacrificial religion was also on trial.

Calling to collective memory the Law requiring witnesses,⁵⁰ Jesus asks for the traumatized witnesses to cast the first stone if they are without impurity, without sin. Girard states, "The first stone is decisive. Once it is cast, a tidal wave begins. All reason and compassion swiftly disappear. Violence and deception triumph".⁵¹ By emphasizing the first stone explicitly, Jesus makes the truth public. In so doing, traumatic personal memories resurface in the surrounding mob, re-traumatizing and exposing the duplicity of the human heart, rendering all credible witnesses speechless and stoneless. Girard continues, "As long as the people hesitate, they can look inwards and reflect on how similar they are to their intended victim. When Jesus suggests that only a man without sin should feel entitled to cast the first stone, he knows full well that if these people honestly examine themselves, they will discover how similar they are to the adulterous woman. They will be ashamed of killing a fellow human being for an action they themselves commit with total impunity."⁵²

By requiring the first stone thrower to be entirely free of sin, totally free of any impurity, Jesus radicalizes the sin spectrum to include all sin and all people, unveiling all in need of restoration. This example of case law elucidates Jesus' nonliteral interpretation of the Mosaic Law which he previously explained in Matthew 5:27-28. His Third Way involves self-examination—the Golden Rule, being concerned with the "log" in our own eye, or the stone in our own hand. Jesus' statement evokes the response we will always have when examining self: "I have impurities too". We—not just her—need a

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016), 171.

⁴⁹ Boase and Frechette, 169.

⁵⁰ Deuteronomy 17:6; Deuteronomy 19:15-20 NIV.

⁵¹ Girard, 8-9.

⁵² Girard, 13-14.

restorative touch; Jesus unifies the former polarizing “us” and “them” as they together are converted into “we”.

Perhaps Jesus was also pointing something else out inside those human hearts with that statement. The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees had cited the seventh commandment, sin of adultery, yet had brought only the woman guilty of that impurity. By treating her as property, as a non-being, Jesus might have flipped the stone tablets on them as they incriminated themselves by not bringing the man who was also guilty of adultery. In contrast, the tenth commandment centers on coveting a neighbor’s property—including his neighbor’s wife. In effect was Jesus saying something akin to, ‘*You have heard it said, ‘you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife... or anything that belongs to your neighbor’.*⁵³ *But I say to you, ‘no human being made in the image of God is property; no one is a non-being.’* If so, then the tenth commandment was not concerned with her moral impurity, but the males’ perception of property. The double standard admonishing males had been used to punish females. “Jesus was challenging in one sentence the inbred assumptions and teachings of both culture and religion that the woman in sexual sin is more guilty than the male”.⁵⁴ While illuminating their treatment of this woman as property, was Jesus also exposing his accusers’ envious, covetous hearts toward him? Unveiling hearts to their own complicity and duplicity, the witnesses were silenced. All walked away but the woman and the only pure, sinless One.⁵⁵

Lamb-like, the voice of self-giving love speaks gently, privately, and with clarity to the traumatized woman asking,

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now

And leave your life of sin”.⁵⁶

“Jesus and the woman—in Augustine’s magnificent phrase *miser cordia et misera* (mercy with misery)—are the core of a renewed communion, for their connection is not the consequence of condemnation but rather the fruit of forgiveness offered and accepted. As giver and receiver of compassion, Jesus and

⁵³ Exodus 20:17 NIV.

⁵⁴ Wahlberg, 22-23.

⁵⁵ John 8:8-9 NIV.

⁵⁶ John 8:10-11 NIV.

the woman embody the social form that participates in the loop of grace”.⁵⁷ While not condoning her sin, Jesus gave her a freeing judgment. He did not publicly shame her but spoke life to her, face-to-face, affirming that sin does not require a negative judgment; it requires a restoration. The death penalty for her sin was forgiven by Jesus. He had “ransomed” her life, a foreshadowing of his cruciform self-giving love for all, replacing death with life. The non-condemning Jesus affirmed the woman who had been “othered”, sexualized, and dehumanized. His co-suffering love not only protected the victim of demonically incited accusations but protected the perpetrators of those accusations from the guilt of their own violence. In this way, Jesus does not reveal a death-dealing God but a life-giving God, offering his life for both victims and perpetrators because all suffer trauma in need of compassionate healing. Of course, loving one’s neighbor precludes adultery. However, loving one’s neighbor also includes restorative healing for the traumatizing sin that affects one and all.

Bishop Barron relates, “The final admonition of the Lord to sin no more is perfectly congruent with this interpretation. Sin is always a form of sundering. Even a seemingly ‘private’ or victimless sin such as adultery is, in fact, divisive, and hence both participates in and contributes to the overall spirit of false *communion*. Jesus is therefore telling the woman not to return to the way of being which has just extricated her”.⁵⁸ She is to live free from the fear of death. To “sin no more” means that sin no longer carries the death penalty, but instead, carries the gracious consequence of compassionate forgiveness and restoration with the power of God’s love as the motivation which propels toward love of neighbor to bring abundant community life. Fitch paraphrases John 8:11 like this: “Work out in community what it means to become whole in the power of the Spirit”.⁵⁹

Despite the disagreements of the placement of this story, it seems fitting to be here, as Jesus establishes himself as divine “witness” as light of the world in John 8:12-20. With God the Father as his witness, Jesus reveals that He stands in constant oneness with the Father and is the one who sheds light on the darkness of the human heart alone. Humans judge by human standards and cannot see clearly enough to judge another, case in point being the end of this chapter, where “they picked up stones to stone him”.⁶⁰ The trajectory of the rest of the book of John leads ultimately to a cruciform, self-giving,

⁵⁷ Barron, 511.

⁵⁸ Barron, 511.

⁵⁹ Fitch, 171.

⁶⁰ John 8:59 NIV.

scapegoated Jesus who identifies with all victims and perpetrators of injustice to offer transformative love and life to all.

Conclusions and Implications

Jesus disrupted the divisive and polarizing purity system of law and replaced it with compassion as the “ethos of the community that mirrors God”.⁶¹ He challenged the purity system and all of its dividing lines and boundaries which exclude, and established a community founded on loving compassion and inclusiveness which unites, embodying a radical and alternative social vision for a beloved community. Jesus knew the laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy yet was free to ignore them in favor of living out the overarching Great Commandments of love for God and love for neighbor. He freely rejected death-dealing law codes; “the God Jesus reveals is one who deals mercifully, not murderously, with sinners, while still calling them to leave their sinful ways behind”.⁶² As the fulfillment of the Law, Jesus subverted the purity system of law and replaced it with the “royal law” of love of God and compassionate love toward neighbor.⁶³ His ethos of compassion shattered the polarizing boundaries separating people from loving each other. In Galatians 6.1-2, Paul encapsulates this restorative community ethic that Jesus mercifully modeled. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ”.⁶⁴

What could therapeutic care, compassionate healing, and restoration in community look like today in our churches? Imagine listening with compassion to stories, identifying our own story in another’s story; or someone listening to your painful story with compassion. We would empathize with trauma because we too have trauma, and we too have traumatized others. Restoration in the beloved community would not condemn or shame, but it would forgive as we have been forgiven—completely and repeatedly. Restoration would not be a systematic protocol of impersonal discipline with accountability to purity priests and pastors, but merciful, gentle, relational burden-bearing that heals human hearts. A restorative community would humbly carry burdens with companionship and solidarity, humanizing and healing each other in love with great care. Love would be prioritized over law in the context of personal

⁶¹ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again*, 54.

⁶² Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 193.

⁶³ Matthew 5:17; James 2:8 NIV.

⁶⁴ Galatians 6:1-2 NIV.

narratives, remembering that “the priority of Jesus was not on defending a text, it was on defending people—in particular defending the victims of religious violence and abuse”.⁶⁵

Where might a christotelic law hermeneutic be applied in the church today? A good start might be to confess our complicity in the propagation of a “purity culture” in the Church which has shamed and traumatized a generation of youth, and especially our LGBTQ+ neighbors.⁶⁶ Furthermore, we can be alerted when various purity cultures arise across ideologies to polarize and ostracize; in place of complicity, we can interrupt the “mob” mentality by subverting “othering” as Jesus did in creative, life-giving ways. Finally, we can admit, once and for all, that patriarchy continues to affect our sacred text interpretation and has informed our theology in violent, unethical, and un-Christlike ways to accuse and abuse vulnerable people, and in reality, all people.

Borg contends, “The same hermeneutical struggle goes on in the church today. In parts of the church there are groups that emphasize holiness and purity as the Christian way of life, and they draw their own sharp social boundaries between the righteous and sinners. It is a sad irony that these groups, many of which are seeking very earnestly to be faithful to Scripture, end up emphasizing those parts of Scripture that Jesus himself challenged and opposed. An interpretation of Scripture faithful to Jesus and the early Christian movement sees the Bible through the lens of compassion, not purity.”⁶⁷

St. Augustine elaborated a similar hermeneutical priority of love centuries ago. “Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought”.⁶⁸

I wonder what conclusions Sam Harris might make reading sacred texts through a christotelic lens rather a literalist hermeneutic. I imagine the life that might be resurrected within the literalist culture of evangelicalism in doing so. I also wonder how the Church might embody a compassionate community, which mirrored the interpretation of scripture that Jesus fulfilled, taught and demonstrated. Paul gives a beautiful metaphor about what that might be like in 2 Corinthians 3:3: “You show that you are a letter

⁶⁵ Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives and Why We All Need to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did* (San Francisco, CA: Metanoia Books, 2014), 27.

⁶⁶ Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Atria, 2018), 8; Borg, 59; Flood, 145.

⁶⁷ Borg, 59.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.36.40. Quoted in “Augustine on the Hermeneutical Priority of Love”, *Michiana Covenant Presbyterian Church*, April 14, 2013. Accessed November 28, 2020. <https://michianacovenant.org/augustine-on-the-hermeneutical-priority-of-love/>

from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts". Perhaps the onlooking world would echo Tertullian saying, "Look how they love one another!"⁶⁹ Ethically living out the royal law of love from the heart in the beloved community would be a witness of the Kingdom of God story on earth as it is in heaven, a foretaste of the restoration of all things.

Bibliography

Augustine, *De Adulterinis Conjugiis* 2:6–7, 107, quoted in "Adulterous Marriages" in *The Fathers of the Church: St. Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*. Translated by Charles T. Huegelmeier. New York: Catholic University of America Press, 1955.

Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.36.40, quoted in "Augustine on the Hermeneutical Priority Of Love". *Michiana Covenant Presbyterian Church*, April 14, 2013. Accessed on November 28, 2020.

<https://michianacovenant.org/augustine-on-the-hermeneutical-priority-of-love/>.

Barron, Robert. "The Woman Caught in Adultery." In *The Word on Fire Bible: The Gospels*, edited by Brandon Vogt, 509-511, Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2020.

Bartor, Assnat. "Reading Biblical Law as Narrative." *Prooftexts* 32, no. 3 (2012): 292-311.

JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2970/prooftexts.32.3.292. Accessed November 28, 2020.

Boase, Elizabeth and Frechette, Christopher G. *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2016.

Borg, Marcus. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

Cover, Robert. "Nomos and Narrative." In *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of*

Robert Cover, edited by Martha Minnow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat, 95-96. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

⁶⁹ Tertullian, *Apology* 39. Quoted in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 87.

Enns, Peter. "Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving Beyond a Modernist Impasse". *WTJ* 65 (2003): 263-87.

Eslinger, Lyle. "Review". In *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108, no. 4 (1989): 685–686. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3267188. Accessed November 18, 2020.

Flannagan, Matthew. "Stoning Adulterers". *Christian Research Journal* 34, no. 06 (2011): 1-4. <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>. Accessed November 28, 2020.

Flood, Derek. *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did*. San Francisco, CA: Metanoia Books, 2014.

Fitch, David. *The Church of Us vs. Them: Freedom from a Faith That Feeds on Making Enemies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019.

Girard, Rene. "The First Stone." *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 52, issue 1 (1999): 1-16. https://pdcnet.org/renascence/content/renascence_1999_0052_0001_0005_0017. Accessed November 18, 2020.

Halberstam, Chaya. "The Art of Biblical Law." *Prooftexts* 27, no. 2 (2007): 345–364. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/pft.2007.27.2.345. Accessed November 18, 2020.

Harris, Sam and Nawaz, Maajid. *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Jersak, Brad. "One Story, Two Revelations, Four Voices: Reading Biblical Narrative Christocentrically." Accessed November 18, 2020. <https://clarion-journal.com/files/one-story-1.pdf>.

Jewett, Paul K. *Man as Male and Female*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975.

Klein, Linda Kay. *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*. New York: Atria, 2018.

Michiana Covenant Presbyterian Church. "Augustine on the Hermeneutical Priority of Love," April 14, 2013. Accessed on November 28, 2020. <https://michianacovenant.org/augustine-on-the-hermeneutical-priority-of-love/>.

Mills, Watson E. (ed.) *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990.

Origen, *HomJos* 9:8; FC 105:104, 105, quoted in Mark Sheridan, *The Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015.

Seibert, Eric A. *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009.

Sheridan, Mark. *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015.

Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997.

Tertullian, *Apology* 39, 87, quoted in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997.

Wahlberg, Rachel Conrad. *Jesus According to a Woman*. New York: Paulist Press, 1975.

Westbrook, Raymond. "Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes". *Revue Biblique*, vol. 92, no. 2, 1985, pp. 247-264. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44088745. Accessed November 18, 2020.

Wright, N.T. *John for Everyone: Part One*. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.