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The woman threatened with stoning in John 7:53–8:11 in the light of gender-based violence: New insights for interpreting the pericope

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The article presents an analysis of John 7:53–8:11, using the interpretive framework of symbolic violence to expose how patriarchy has been legitimised by Judeo-Christian tradition through the naturalisation of violence against women. Unlike moralising interpretations, which emphasise the contrast between female guilt and divine mercy, this study demonstrates that the core of the narrative lies in the instrumentalisation of the woman by their accusers. This constitutes an act of male domination legitimised 'behind the narrative' (in the Hebrew Bible), exercised 'within the narrative' by the accusers, and perpetuated 'in front of the narrative' in patriarchal reinterpretations of it. Thus, a suitable number of its receptions have reinforced symbolic violence against women by emphasising the guilt of the accused woman and ignoring the abuse she was subjected to by the circle of men who brought her before Jesus. Similarly, Jesus' symbolic action of rejecting violence while confronting the conscience of the accusers, but comforting and restoring dignity to the woman, has not been sufficiently appreciated. It is proposed that Jesus' attitude lays the foundation for an understanding of gender equality, and his symbolic act of rejecting violence is analysed.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This approach to the story allows us to deconstruct the imaginaries and practices of violence against women and encourage those who have been abused to rebuild their lives and projects without fear of stigma or abuse.

Keywords: adultery; patriarchy; symbolic violence; Jn 7:53–8:11; violence against women; Bible and women; gender justice.

Introduction

According to Pierre Bourdieu (2000), symbolic violence consists of a form of power exercised through the imposition of ways of thinking and perceiving reality. This mechanism succeeds in normalising social inequalities without initially resorting to physical force, although such normalisation ultimately leads to, or even justifies, direct violence. For this author, male domination is considered the paradigmatic form of this type of violence, constituting a complex process that affects people regardless of gender, which explains why sexist patterns are sometimes reproduced by women themselves. Certain religious traditions, of Christian origin, reinforce this habitus by sanctifying patriarchal structures that have been presented as normative in Western culture. This study analyses how certain biblical narratives – and their respective interpretations – such as that of the woman threatened with stoning in John 7:53–8:11, may be an expression of this sacralisation of patriarchy and, therefore, of the perpetuation of symbolic violence against women.

Violence against women in the West as a cultural reception [*Wirkung*] of violence against women in the Bible

The Judeo-Christian religious tradition is one of the factors that has shaped and characterised the so-called Western culture. Many of the ethical, political, artistic and spiritual values that identify contemporary society have been built from it. In particular, the Bible (Rodríguez-Fernández 2017):

[H]as undoubtedly contributed to shaping the social imaginary in the West. Mediated by Judeo-Christian theology, biblical texts have for centuries permeated our culture with particular themes, archetypes, characters, symbols, and even literary genres. (p. 50)

In this sense, several of the causes of conflicts and various forms of violence throughout these two millennia have also been promoted through appropriations of some texts present in the Bible

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(Casas-Ramírez 2023). In particular, patriarchy, religiously legitimised, has been the ideological and cultural cause of various forms of violence against women.

In this regard, Rodríguez-Fernández (2017:50) considers that the stories and forms of discrimination against women in the Bible not only reflect contexts analogous or similar to contemporary ones, but that the expressions of violence against women in Christianised societies constitute an authentic form of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, in the Gadamerian sense (Gadamer 2005:370–377), of the sexist violence embodied in the Bible. For this reason, part of the purpose of this article is to show that, if these forms of violence have been legitimised through dominant theological discourses and particular ways of reading the Bible, then theology and biblical hermeneutics, in addition to addressing academic questions, have an ethical responsibility to examine, rethink and deconstruct their patriarchal ideological assumptions in order to contribute to the elimination of the androcentric, sexist and misogynistic structures and practices of those who remain tied to a framework of Christian tradition.

In this sense, this study addresses the story of John 7:53–8:11 in whose plot, traditionally called ‘of the adulterous woman’, various forms of direct, structural and cultural violence appear against the character of the nameless woman who is accused of adultery by a group of men who hold a certain moral and religious authority (Scribes and Pharisees). Violence against this woman is in accordance with the multiple discriminations established by the patriarchal system and by the religious legislation in which she lives. At the same time, classical interpretations of this pericope reinforce such discriminations, which end up spreading and appropriating among those who listen to them and follow them.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s socio-analytical perspectives on symbolic violence and male domination, this article shifts the exegetical and theological focus of the pericope, traditionally centred on mercy and sin, towards a structural analysis of patriarchal violence and the instrumentalisation of women. To achieve this objective, the proposed analytical approach firstly, will delve into the understanding of the category of ‘adultery’ in the Hebrew Bible and its gender connotations; this is because, although it is a story written in the early centuries of Christianity, the Jewish cultural background to its narrative development is undeniable. Secondly, a reinterpretation of the passage in John 7:53–8:11 will be offered, examining how it has traditionally (and patriarchally) been interpreted. Finally, this study will point out how this re-reading of the story can link the Gospel message with the construction of favourable conditions for gender justice in those contexts where gender-based violence may be fuelled by imaginaries derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Adultery in the Hebrew Bible: Men who commit adultery and adulterous women

Adultery as a prohibition directed at men

The legal codes in the culture of the Ancient Fertile Crescent are written and directed, almost exclusively, by men and towards men (or by their respective divinities, also male); See, for example, articles 125, 129, 132, 141–142 of the ‘Code of Hammurabi’ (Matthews & Benjamin 2004:104–105). As part of this culture, in the biblical tradition too, men are primarily the bearers of rights and duties; consequently, the prohibition against adultery is directed chiefly at them. The obligations and requirements imposed on women, who have a subordinate legal status, come under the scope of caring for and protecting a man’s private property and defending his honour. Women’s duties are imposed as a guarantee for the realisation and maintenance of men’s rights: They must maintain and enhance men’s honour and avoid embarrassing them at all costs.

Thus, in the *Decalogue*, the seventh commandment in Jewish tradition (sixth in some Christian reinterpretations), ‘you shall not commit adultery’ (Ex 20:14; Dt 5:18) is directly related to the last, ‘You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, nor covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s’ (Ex 20:17; see also the version of Dt 5:21). In all cases, it is the man who is forbidden to covet, desire or commit adultery. In the same way, the neighbour, whose property, including his wife, cannot be coveted, is a man. Even Jesus’ reinterpretation of adultery in Matthew 5:27 (along the same lines as Pr 6:23–29) points only to the man as the subject of the fault and to the woman as the cause of it. It is only within the framework of Roman law that the possibility of a woman committing adultery by ‘repudiating her husband’ and marrying another man is considered, according to Mark 10:11.

A man may possess the women he wishes, as long as he has the capacity to provide for them and as long as they are not married, that is, they do not belong to or have been promised to another man (Dt 22:22–27). Indeed, there is no ‘rule in Israeli Law defining as adultery extramarital sexual relations between a husband and a woman when she is not married’ (Granados 2014:135). Likewise, the abuse of a virgin woman who has not yet been betrothed does not have the punishable sanction of adultery, but the broken honour of the girl’s father must be restored with a pecuniary sum, and the abused woman will be considered as a wife, revictimising her (Dt 22:28–29). Sexual relations with prostitutes are neither well regarded (Pr 23:27; Sir 9:3.6) nor classified as adultery (Lacan 2001:51–52). In this way, it becomes evident that the prohibition does not aim to safeguard love, to protect the dignity of women, to maintain the sacredness of the institution of marriage or to seal the fidelity between the parties – these perspectives will correspond to later moralising interpretations – but to protect the property and

honourability of the *paterfamilias*, guaranteeing, in addition, the consanguineous legitimacy of his lineage.

The adulteress will always be the woman

Paradoxically, although the law-prohibition is addressed to men, and indeed the texts speak of men who commit adultery (such as Lv 20:10; Pr 6:32; Jr 5:7; 23:14), no male in the Bible, except the one mentioned in Leviticus 20:10, is described as an adulterer [ἄνομος]. This is an adjective foisted almost exclusively on women, as it is well represented, in a narrative way, in Proverbs 7:1–27, or as Paul expresses it in Romans 7:2–3:

[T]hus a married woman is bound by Law to her husband as long as he lives; but when the husband is dead, she is freed from the law of the husband. Therefore, while the husband lives, she will be called an adulteress [μοιχαλίσ] if she marries another. (translated from Greek by the author)

On the one hand, Sirach 23:22–27 condemns the children for their mother's infidelity, bringing them before the court (vv. 23–24) and cursing them with barrenness (vv. 25–26). Hence, the labelling of a person as a 'bastard' is, ultimately, a reinforcement of the social stigma for his mother's adultery. In fact, 'female sexual transgression poses a serious threat to the social order, since it is a world in which social and symbolic structures depend on a patrilineal line' (Rodríguez-Fernández 2017:70). In this sense, the so-called 'Ordeal of jealousy', described in Numbers 5:11–31, is only performed against the wife who is suspected of having committed adultery, subjecting her to public humiliation and risk to her health, and there is no analogous ritual towards the husband (Artuso 2021).

As a consequence, men who hold some degree of power, such as David – the messiah par excellence of Israel – will be able to desire and abuse the women of their neighbours without being branded as adulterers or rapists (2 Sm 11). On the other hand, subordinate women, such as Bathsheba, even if they are victims and abused, will be remembered and revictimised by later traditions as seductresses, adulteresses, and sinners (Howell 2024).

The 'god', faithful husband, and the people, adulterous woman who must be punished

In the same sense as above, a good number of prophetic texts represent the monolatric relationship of the God Yahweh with Israel, Judah or Jerusalem through the recourse to the monogamous nuptial metaphor. In these texts, God always shows himself to be the only and always faithful one. His people-wife, because of her idolatrous attitudes and her infidelity to the Covenant, commonly ends up accused of having committed adultery and prostitution and therefore deserving of punishment and public humiliation by her divine and zealous consort (Hs 2:4–7; 4:10; Jr 5:7; 13:27; Ezk 23:43ff; Is 57:3) (Casas-Ramírez 2024:154). Therefore, according to the theology present in the Deuteronomist tradition, the death sentence against a woman who commits adultery and against her lover (Lv 20:10) would be nothing more than the

mimetic reflection of the violent action of the God Yahweh scorned and dishonoured against his own infidel people and against the other peoples and their respective tutelary divinities with whom his people committed adultery. The punishment inflicted by the God-husband victimised by the deception assumes five components:

- Punishable: It constitutes the penalties that the other party must pay for having committed the deception.
- Vindictive, in the face of the god-man: It is the means through which the husband (or the 'god') can vent his anger at having been put to shame and thus achieves the recovery of lost honour and manhood.
- Persuasive, in the face of society: It must be public so that no other woman or the people, even think of committing adultery and/or idolatry.
- Pedagogical: Physical punishment is understood as part of the duty of the god-man to educate and 'domesticate' the woman-people (Althaus-Reid 2023:57). Hence, some theologies teach that evil and suffering are part of the divine pedagogy's own condescension.
- Vindictive, in the face of the woman-people: It is the condition of possibility for the woman-people to obtain forgiveness from her merciful consort.

It should be clarified that the last two components are only achievable in the relationship of the people with their god because in the human marriage sphere, the death sentence is inevitable, so there would be no opportunity for vindication for the woman. In this way, it is intended to show that divine compassion is above human justice.

With this panorama, it is not in vain that, as Rodríguez-Fernández (2017) states:

The identification of Yahweh with a jealous or deceived husband who punishes his wife for breaking her vows has come to legitimize violence against women ... The clear correlation between Yahweh-husband and Israel-wife reinforces existing stereotypes in asymmetrical gender relations and sustains and even enhances male dominance and the associated code of honor that includes mistreatment. (p. 67)

In this regard, the sentence issued in Ezekiel 16:37–41 by the deceived God against Jerusalem, his prostituted consort, is especially pertinent to this study:

Therefore, behold, I am going to gather together all the lovers whom you have pleased, all whom you have loved, and also those whom you have hated; I will gather them from every side against you, and I will uncover your nakedness before them, so that they may see all your nakedness. I am going to inflict on you the punishment of adulterous women and those who shed blood: I will deliver you up to wrath and jealousy. I will deliver you into their hands (...). Then they will incite the crowd against you, they will stone you. (translated from Spanish by the author)

The sentence anticipates and reproduces, in a certain way, the violence and abuse to which the woman accused of adultery will be exposed in John 7:53–8:11, in that Jerusalem and the woman are placed and exposed 'before' (Ezk 16:37) or 'in the midst' of the men (Jn 8:4); and in that the sentence, both for

Jerusalem and for the woman, is stoning. The big difference is that, while in Ezekiel those who will execute the sentence against Jerusalem are her own lovers, with whom she committed adultery, in the Fourth Gospel those who would be willing to execute the sentence are those who bring the woman before Jesus, that is, the scribes and Pharisees; there is no mention, however, of with whom she was supposedly caught in adultery.

The pericope of the woman threatened with stoning in John 7:53–8:11

A stigmatised woman, a suppressed text, and a moralised story

Classical critical studies on the account of John 7:53–8:11 tend to title the pericope as ‘The adulterous woman’ (Beutler 2016; Brown 1999; Zumstein 2016), loading, from the outset, the guilt on this woman, in the same line as the misogynistic prejudices of the preceding scriptures. For the most part, they lend credence, without any objection, to the accusing testimony of the scribes and Pharisees, ‘this woman has been caught in the act of adultery’, without taking into account that their instrumental use of the woman and the Mosaic Law to test Jesus would admit a certain blanket of doubt over their testimony. Even the narrator’s omniscient perspective reiterates the facts for which she is accused, in v.3. However, the story is clear that she is only accused because a sentence has not yet been issued that blames her.

Unfortunately, this title has conditioned the interpretation and has revictimised women (Guardiola-Sáenz 2002). In this way, the interpreters and their readers can unconsciously assume the position of the accusers, who condemn the woman and label her as an adulteress, without having yet listened to her, as Nicodemus denounced in 7:51. Such studies, to which must be added a good number of patristic commentaries on the Fourth Gospel, among which that of Augustine of Hippo stands out, for its decisive influence on the history of interpretation (Agustín de Hipona 1955:139), have focused their reading on the contrast between the sin and misery of women, which would well make her worthy of the punishment for which she is accused, and the mercy of Jesus, who would free her from condemnation, but not before demanding that she ‘sin no more’ (Jn 8:11) (Francis 2016; O’Day 1992). From these perspectives, even Jesus’ final words to the woman, would continue to reinforce the sexist imaginary about female adultery and sinfulness.

Most studies also insist on the character of interpolation or late insertion of the story in the whole of the Fourth Gospel, as evidenced by textual criticism, so they tend to omit the analysis of the pericope or to treat it as an appendix alien to the Johannine literary and theological project (Bultmann 1971; Dodd 2008; Mateos & Barreto 1971; Schnackenburg 1980). In this sense, although the first manuscripts that testify to the presence of the story in John date from the fourth century, in the *Exposition* of Papias of Hierapolis (written

around 110 C.E.) the knowledge of a similar episode is indicated in the so-called *Gospel of the Hebrews*, as reported by Eusebius of Caesarea (Maier 2010:1325; Knust & Wasserman 2019:87). Thus, evidence of an early extra-canonical dissemination of the narrative has led some authors to propose that it originated in traditions dating back to the historical Jesus, going so far as to assert that it ‘exhibits criteria of historicity’, is consistent with the characterisation of Jesus in the Synoptics (Kaczorowski 2018), and probably has ‘its roots in the memory of an event that occurred during Jesus’ ministry’ (Moloney 2005:255).

For some authors, such as Augustine himself, who put forward the ‘suppression hypothesis’, the story was indeed part of one of the Gospels, but it was suppressed, perhaps because of some resentment that it could lead to a certain laxity or indulgence with respect to adultery (Culpepper 1998:170). According to this view, Jesus’ attitude of offering unrestricted forgiveness may have contradicted the strict penitential discipline of the early church (Conti 2002:97). It is possible that the episode may have been part of the Lucan tradition, possibly located after Luke 21:37–39. In addition, the bina ‘scribes and Pharisees’ or the mention of the Mount of Olives does not exist in John, but it is frequent in Luke (Reinhartz 2011:174). Similarly, it is possible to identify a certain dramatic parallel with the story of Jesus and the anointing by the woman labelled a sinner in Luke 7:36–50 (Hughes 2013:235).

The interpolated pericope in the plot of the Fourth Gospel

In its current location, it is possible to set up narrative and theological links between the pericope and the broader dramatic framework in which it was inserted. Thus, in the first place chapters 7 and 8 are framed in the celebration of *Sukkot*, the feast of lights (Suk 5:1–4), which evokes the presence of God dwelling amid the people through the Tent of meeting. In the postexilic period, the symbol of this tent was materialised in the Temple (Suk 5:4) (Del Valle 2011:267). Well, these chapters present Jesus, the incarnate logos who celebrates *Sukkot*, ‘pitching his tent’ amid the people (Jn 1:14), teaching and presenting himself as the light of the world (Jn 8:12) in the Temple (8:20). They also emphasise the theme of judgement (7:22–24) and the centrality of testimony (8:13–18), issues that will bring the conflict between Jesus and ‘the Jews’ to its climactic point because chapter 8 ends by indicating that they wanted to put an end to Jesus by stoning him (Thompson 2015). Several of these motifs are also present in the pericope of the woman threatened with stoning: the Temple, the teaching of Jesus, the trial, the testimony, the accusation, the stoning, and the conflict between Jesus and the Jews, represented here by the scribes and the Pharisees.

In fact, in the immediately preceding passage, the Pharisees question the guards for not having arrested Jesus and end by affirming: ‘Those people who do not know the Law are

accused' (7:49). Paradoxically, as will be indicated later, in the interpretation they will make of the Law in John 7:53–8:11, they will show that they do not know the Law either or, what may be worse, they distort and instrumentalise it (8:5), which entails that their own curse falls on them. Secondly, in response to the affirmation of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, one of them, invoking the Law, which they pride themselves on knowing, asks them: 'Does our Law judge a man without having first heard him and without knowing what he is doing?' (7:51). The question is at the same time a prolepsis that links the fatal fate of Jesus with the fatal sentence of the accused woman: Just as at the end of the Gospel the authorities will judge Jesus without 'having heard him beforehand and without knowing what he is doing' (as narrated in Jn 11:45–53), in the passage immediately following they will judge and seek to condemn the woman without even listening to her.

Thirdly, the link between Jesus and the woman is reinforced in the Johannine narrative by the motifs of the stones and the stoning: Just as the woman is about to be stoned, in 8:59 it is stated that the Jews 'took stones to throw at Jesus; but Jesus hid himself and came out of the Temple'. For this reason, the pericope contributes to the unity of chapter 8, which begins with the threat of stoning the woman and ends with the threat of stoning Jesus (Sánchez 2010). Thus, John 7:53–8:11, even though it is a late interpolation, is interwoven with the plot of the Gospel and, in doing so, relates the threat hanging over Jesus to that suffered by the woman, placing both of them in the same vital horizon of danger, injustice and victimisation. In this regard, Caicedo (2021) considers that the pericope develops a 'parallel narrative' between the story of Jesus and that of the woman: Both are threatened with stoning and both are saved from it. For the author, the woman would be an 'alter ego' of Jesus (also threatened with stoning) and, at the same time, an 'alter ego' of the Judeo-Christian communities who, by the end of the first century, would have faced accusations, threats and persecution by the Jewish authorities (such as the expulsion from the synagogue mentioned in Jn 9:22).

Dramatic development of the story: A contest of challenge and response

For a critical understanding of the tensions present in the plot, Guardiola-Sáenz (2002:143) identifies four 'zones of contact' or 'borders' that are crossed in the story and whose transgression gradually increases the conflict between Jesus and the authorities: Spatial frontiers, Gender or moral codes, Political-religious factions, and Communication codes. The consideration of these areas for the analysis of the text, in addition to pointing out the tensions, highlights the contradictions of Jesus' adversaries. The core of the story is not simply the woman's sin or Jesus' forgiveness, but the challenge the accusers pose to Jesus by trampling on the woman's dignity. The woman is merely exploited, publicly dishonoured, and used to trap the one they call master.

Along the same lines, based on the recourse to cultural anthropology, Conti (2002:101) reads the story as a 'contest of challenge and response', common in the philosophical, political and legal sphere of the Greco-Roman world. This consisted of a public social interaction where the honour of men, which is the supreme value in the Mediterranean culture of the first century, was at stake. The contest had clear phases: Challenge from the challenger, perception of the challenge, and reaction from the receiver with evaluation of the witnesses. In the pericope, the contest is interpreted as a succession of four parallel scenes or a chiasmus with the pronouncement of Jesus in v.7 as its centre, this being the climactic point of the plot (Culpepper 1998:170; Mela 2020). In the next section, an approach to each scene of the story is proposed, following this pattern and integrating other structuring proposals (Beutler 2016:196; Bruner 2012:384–385; Moloney 2005:252; Zumstein 2016:358–363).

Proposed approach and structural integration

Staging (7:53–8:2)

The previous scene (7:40–52) closes by contrasting between dusk and dawn; between the authorities, who march 'each for his own way', and Jesus, who 'went to the Mount of Olives'. The mention of this mountain, being a 'typical feature of Luke' (Lk 21:37–38) (Moloney 2005:153), is connected with Zech 14, which announces the arrival of the 'day of the Lord' whose sign will be that he will 'set his feet on the Mount of Olives' (v.4) to begin the final judgement of the nations.

The set-up – Challenge of the challenger (8:3–6a): Scribe-Pharisees and Jesus

In the morning, Jesus returns to the temple to teach. However, the teaching environment is transformed into a 'legal scenario' (Gonzaga & Torres 2023). The scribes and Pharisees arrive to introduce him to the woman who, according to them, 'was caught in flagrante adultery'. The fact that the woman is unnamed may be significant for the interpretation of the text because, frequently, many of the symbolic characters in the Fourth Gospel are unnamed, which increases their potential to represent collectivities without losing their particularity (O'Sullivan 2015:2). Next, the accusers question Jesus about his opinion regarding what Moses prescribed in this regard. The narrator, in v.6, makes a comment to the reader to show the real intention of the authorities: 'They said this to test him, to have something to accuse him of'. Thus, the accusation of the woman was established as the pretext to accuse Jesus. Jesus 'is not asked, for a forensic sentence (because he is not a judge), but for an opinion on the application of the Mosaic Law to a particular case (...). For this reason, Jesus is called 'master' and is asked for a legal interpretation (*halakah*), while it was believed that the rabbinical stance before the law could bring forth the 'higher intention of divine revelation' (Kim 2002:125). Although an actual event of adultery can be assumed, the text lacks

elements necessary for a formal process (the adulterer, witnesses, the deceived husband), suggesting that this is not an actual court case, but a legal controversy. A male predominance is observed in the trial where the guilt of the woman is presumed in a similar way to the case of Susanna, in Daniel 13 (Beutler 2016:219). The question of the accusers may amount to: 'we have caught her in flagrante adultery, do we take her to the competent court? Shall we just execute her?' (Alonso-Schökel 2002:255). Roman law did not allow execution for adultery, so Jesus' opponents would be proving their fidelity to the Mosaic law or their sympathy with imperial legislation (Reinhartz 2011:174). In this way, the antagonists challenge Jesus as an equal, trying to trap him: If he absolves, he violates the Law of Moses; if he condemns, he violates the Roman law that forbade Jews to impose the death penalty (Conti 2002).

Moreover, it is paradoxical that the scribes and Pharisees intend to accuse the woman according to the Law, but show their partial interpretation by not bringing the man with whom she had supposedly slept because the Law required the death of both, although stoning is not explicitly mentioned as a form of execution of the sentence (Lv 20:10; Dt 22:22) (Ramos-Rodríguez 2017). This penalty will only be spoken of in Deuteronomy 22:23–24, in the case of rape of a virgin woman. All these contradictions stand out, even more, the set-up of the antagonists against Jesus. From the semiotic point of view, a relationship is perceived between the stone, which is the material with which the Temple was built, the place where the scene takes place, the stone tablets, the material in which God embodied the Law with his finger, and the stones with which they want to kill the woman. In this way, a 'petrified' legal and religious reality is perceived, whose harshness is used to subdue and kill instead of liberating and propitiating new life.

Perception of the challenge and reaction of the challenged (8:6b–9a)

Jesus and scribe-pharisees: By bowing down, Jesus seems to physically stand between the victim and the oppressors, renouncing to be on the same level as them, rejecting the challenge and making himself just as vulnerable as the woman, creating a 'third space' (Harvey 1989:244) that de-escalates the conflict. At the same time, their reaction increases the dramatic tension by not responding directly and verbally to the challenge (Ambrosino 2024). Jesus does not respond to force with force, showing that violence can be overcome without retaliation, even when a life is at stake. It is striking that the account 'mentions the woman's accusation twice, while Jesus bows and writes on the ground also twice' (Dibelius 1984:100). This double action of Jesus in bending down to write (8:6 and 8:8) functions as an 'intercalation' or 'sandwich' that 'wraps' his (non)interpretation of the Torah centred on the sentence: 'whoever among you is without sin, let him throw the first stone at him' (v.7) (Keith 2008).

Although it is not specified what Jesus wrote on the ground with his finger, it is striking that the numerous interpretations—both textual (manuscript glosses) and

visual (iconography), as well as patristic commentaries—have speculated so extensively on the content of what he might have written. Some suggested that Jesus wrote down the sins of the accusers [*Glossa Ordinaria*] and others, relying on the expression 'terra terram acusat' (the earth accuses the earth), associated with a sermon by Augustine (Ser 13:4–6), interpreted in Jesus' action a reflection on the fact that the powerful, as mortals, will also be judged (Knust & Wasserman 2010).

For several authors, starting with Augustine, Jesus' action of writing on the ground would evoke the origin of the Mosaic law, which, according to Exodus 31:18; 32:15–16; Deuteronomy 9:10, was written by God with his own finger (MacDonald 2017:221). In this regard, Bede the Venerable affirms (Bede 2012 cited by Elowsky 2012):

[T]he Lord wanted to write on the earth with his finger, to show that it was he who first wrote on the stone the decalogue of the law with his finger. (n.p.)

In this way, it would be shown that Jesus was not only equal to his opponents in the knowledge of the Mosaic Law, but also that he would be above Moses, on a par with God, for whom the Law must be a function of life (Beutler 2016:198).

Other authors interpret Jesus' symbolic action as an allusion to Jeremiah 17:13, as evidence of the intentions of his opponents: 'Those who turn away from you will be written on the earth, because they have forsaken Yahweh, the fountain of living waters' (Reinhartz 2011:174). For his part, Kanagaraj (2013) sees in the action an allusion to Daniel 5:5–9; 24–28, where a finger writes a divine judgement. For this author, Jesus' writing, although not understood by his opponents, 'was powerful enough to disturb them' and, combined with his challenge to 'sinfulness', 'confronted them with their own sins' (Kanagaraj 2013:514).

For authors such as Keith (2008), the importance of the account lies in the fact that Jesus wrote, not in what he wrote. Speculation about the content of what he wrote is fruitless, and the text itself offers no clues in this regard. For him, the description of Jesus' writing is the key to understanding the meaning of the story and the reason for its insertion in the Gospel of John, because there the literate character of Jesus would be affirmed as an answer to the questions of the Jews about his origin and training: 'How does he understand letters without having studied?' (Jn 7:15) and in the context of pagan criticisms of Christian illiteracy that required the Church to present Jesus as a literate leader and as a paradigm for Christian leaders.

On the other hand, according to Moloney (2005:256), the phrase 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone' refers to the legislation of Deuteronomy 17:17 that requires witnesses to cast the first stone, implying that they must be impeccable. With this expression, 'Jesus makes it clear that there is no double standard between men and women in matters of adultery' (ed. Elowsky 2012:373). For this reason, his counter-challenge levels the sins, putting the accusers on the same

TABLE 1: Transformations that have occurred since Jesus' response.

Elements of the narrative	Before Jesus' response	After Jesus' response
Protagonists	The accusers	Jesus and the woman
Status of women	Object of accusation	Subject of dialogue
Perception of Jesus	Teacher	Lord
Focus of the controversy	The sin of women	The conscience of the accusers
Narrative emphasis	The public prosecution	The personal encounter

level as the woman and causing them to lose the contest and, with it, their honour (Conti 2002:104).

Thus, the withdrawal of the accusers, 'beginning with the oldest', suggests a reflection on their own fault, evoking the elders who accused Susanna in Daniel 13 (Beutler 2016:199). Through this combination of actions and words, Jesus 'reversed the situation' against his opponents, transforming the judges into defendants and freeing the woman from condemnation (Kanagaraj 2013).

Outcome and evaluation of the response (8:9b–11): Jesus and the woman

The story describes a progressive departure from the scene of the characters: It had begun with the presence of 'all the people' who came to listen to Jesus' teaching (v.2), then it focused on the accusers (vv. 3-9a), now, at the end, the people and the accusers have left the scene. The narrator now focuses on Jesus and the woman (Sánchez 2010):

[T]he accusers had put the woman in the defendant's place (in the middle) and, although they had already left, she stayed there. Only Jesus, dialoguing with her and sending her to build a new life, makes her leave that place. (p. 33)

Thus, the denouement allows us to understand that the true aim of the story is not the defeat of the adversaries, but the encounter of Jesus with the woman (Moloney 2005:256). She, who until now had still been silent, goes from being an object of accusation to being a subject of dialogue. Through Jesus' invitation to constation of the absence of those who condemn her, the woman responds by affirming, 'No one, Lord' (v.11). Indeed, no one condemns her anymore, nor can they condemn her; neither the scribes nor the Pharisees; neither the interpreters nor the readers. Nor does Jesus. Moreover, her recognition of Jesus as 'lord' [*kyrios*] would reveal a deeper perception of his divinity than that of his accusers, who see him only as 'master' (Gonzaga & Torres 2023).

It is striking that Jesus has a differentiated treatment with respect to the victim, the woman, and with respect to the victimisers, the accusers. He confronts them, he comforts her. But Jesus breaks with the dynamic of victimisation that puts the dignity and life of women at risk, making the stigma of adultery no longer weigh on her, so that she can begin a life freed from evil (Harper 2006:48).

In the end, with Jesus' command to the woman, 'Go, and from now on do not sin anymore' (which recalls Jesus' words to the sick man at the pool of Bethesda in Jn 5:14), one would be left with the impression that Jesus may have believed that she had indeed acted sinfully, just as her accusers claimed

(O'Sullivan 2015:6–7). However, for authors such as Martin and Wright (2015), with these words, Jesus does not express condemnation but rather offers a 'new beginning'. No human being is free from sin, so all of us (including this woman) are recipients of this exhortation from Jesus. Thus, this final interaction of Jesus with the woman, where he returns to her the responsibility for her future, transforms her from object to subject and grants her honour (Conti 2002). The pericope, thus, shows Jesus taking the Law of Moses to its fullness: Listening to everyone, including women, before judging, as Nicodemus had suggested. Moreover, it disqualifies the erroneous judgement of the scribes and Pharisees, opening the way to reveal themselves as the 'light of the world' (8:12) (Mela 2020).

By way of summary, with Jesus' response in v.7 being the axis that marks the dramatic turn of the story, it is possible to find the various transformations that occurred in the scene, as shown in Table 1.

John 7:53–8:11 as a midrash of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Bible?

Because of its clear allusions to the Jewish scriptures, it is relevant to consider the possibility that the story of the woman threatened with stoning corresponds to a midrashic development of the text of Ezekiel 16, previously presented with regard to the nuptial metaphor in which the infidelity of the people to Yahweh is shown as a case of adultery that must be punished. According to what has been said, in Ezekiel 16:37–40 it was pointed out that those who would execute the sentence of stoning would be the lovers of the wife-people themselves. If, in fact, John 7:53–8:11 becomes a midrash of Ezekiel, it could be inferred that those who want to stone the woman, that is, the scribes and Pharisees, represent their own lovers, with whom he would have committed adultery or, better, who would have wanted to have committed adultery with her. This would make more plausible the absence of a single lover on the scene and the reaction of those who 'withdraw one after another' (Jn 8:9) to Jesus' affirmation: 'the one of you who is without sin, let him throw the first stone' (8:7), which, in such a case, could well be paraphrased as 'the one of you who has not committed adultery ...'. In this way, Jesus would be unmasking, not only the crime and the incoherence of the accusers, not only their claim to believe themselves to be the same as the righteous God of Ezekiel's text and to execute, like him, death sentences against the people; It would also be calling into question the naturalisation of divine violence against women-cities that in no sense can be accepted, much less replicated.

The pericope is also linked to the Story of Susanna (Dn 13), where an innocent young woman is unjustly accused by elders, a connection that already appears in medieval moralised Bibles (Knust & Wasserman 2010). In fact, in the story of Susanna, whose plot resembles the judgements of wisdom in the narratives of Israel (such as David's judgement on Absalom's fate in 2 Sm 14:24, or Solomon's judgement on the fate of the child disputed between two women in 1 Ki

3:16–28), there are motifs that will also be found in John 7:53–8:11: Elders chosen as judges by the people (Dn 13:5) (the fact that there are two witnesses validates their testimony, according to Dt 19:15); the public accusation of adultery by the elders against Susanna (13:24); the insistence on the testimony of the elders that they had caught Susanna *red-handed* with her lover (13:39); the condemnation of Susanna to death by the assembly (13:41); the fact that the assembly did not listen to the version of the accused, but may ‘the Lord’ hear his plea (13:44); Daniel’s statement pointing out ‘I am clean from the blood of this woman!’ (13:46); the similarity between Daniel’s and Nicodemus’ call for attention about the need to investigate and have evidence before condemning a person (13:48); and Daniel’s position of sitting down to express his assessment of the case (13:50). However, there is a situation in the story that does not appear in John and is the real reason for the elders’ accusation against Susanna: They ‘began to desire her ... and they have forgotten their righteous judgments’ (13:8–9), they want to abuse her and, as she resists, they blackmail her into acceding to their desires on pain of them testifying against her saying that she was with a man different from her husband (13:19–21). Susanna is aware that she has no escape and prefers to be accused. As a last resort, she begins to ‘cry out with a loud voice’ (v. 22–24), which is what the law requires a woman to do in the event of rape in order to avoid being convicted (Dt 22:23–27).

The possible midrashic connection between the texts of Ezekiel and Daniel with that of John 7:53–8:11 highlights the violence exercised against the woman-people and the doubly culpable character of those who are put in place to eliminate it: Her lovers, in the case of Ezekiel; those who want to abuse it, in the case of Daniel; his accusers, in the case of John. In all cases, the woman is used to unload humiliation and violence on her.

The story of the woman threatened with stoning and a culture that naturalises violence against women

Kim (2002) proposes an ‘intercontextual’ reading of John 7:53–8:1 from a postcolonial feminist perspective, suggesting that the pericope, by going beyond textual limits, challenges the notions of ‘adultery’ and ‘guilt’ and exposes the symbolic violence of the religious-political structures that perpetuate male domination. In this sense, Bourdieu (2000) understands symbolic violence as a form of power that is exercised through the imposition of ways of thinking and perceiving reality, naturalising social inequalities without resorting to physical force; although such naturalisation does end up causing and even justifying physical violence. For the author, the paradigmatic form of this violence is the phenomenon of male domination, which, far from being only violence exercised by men on women, is a complex process of domination that affects agents without distinction of gender; this explains why there are abused women who defend the actions of their partners against them and who educate their sons and daughters perpetuating gender normative patterns.

Following Kim’s intuitions, it is possible to affirm that, in the pericope of study, the rigid interpretation of the law, such as that exercised by the scribes and Pharisees by bringing only the accused woman, is an example of ‘symbolic violence’ and male domination. *Habitus* is the internalisation of these practices and values, making them seem ‘natural’, while religious law and tradition consolidate *habitus* by perpetuating such domination and gender inequality (Ramos-Rodríguez 2017). In this way, there is symbolic violence of a patriarchal nature, ‘before the story’, in the terms in which the Law was drafted; ‘within the story’, in the way the scribes and Pharisees who accuse the woman interpret the Law; but also, ‘in front of the story’, in the way in which the Christian tradition has interpreted the text.

In this sense, as Conti indicates, the most surprising thing about the narrative is the equal treatment that Jesus gives to ‘honourable’ men and ‘dishonoured’ women. For Jesus, the woman and her accusers are equal, with equality being the focus of the story. Thus, the story would be a testimony against a social order dominated by men. For this reason, the author also proposes that the egalitarian attitude that Jesus assumes in the story and the fears about what would happen if women’s sexuality ceased to be under male control were what really influenced the late marginalisation and inclusion of the story and its moralising interpretation throughout history (Conti 2002).

For Ambrosino (2024), the image of Jesus writing on the ground is challenging, like a staging that protests against violence. Jesus’ ‘scribble’, his gestures, and the space he opened with them, offer guidelines for liberation and resistance so that believers can also ‘scribble’ against the violence that surrounds them. Ambrosino invites readers to ‘experience’ the scribbling of Jesus: The sounds of the crowd falling silent, the rubbing of fingers in the dust, the posture of Jesus. This act is presented as an incongruous response to a serious situation, a possible strategy to gain time, a meditation or a way of processing thoughts. Christians are called to ‘keep the scribbling of Jesus’, to embody his style in their own lives.

Conclusion

The semantic analysis of the category ‘adultery’ in the Hebrew Bible and the study of John 7:53–8:11 have highlighted the symbolic violence that, since the biblical texts, has been exercised against women. As these texts are considered a normative reference of the so-called Western culture, violence and discrimination against women have not only continued, but have been naturalised and even legitimised theologically. The analysis carried out on the pericope has highlighted the way in which Jesus confronts this patriarchal and legalistic system, laying the foundations for a more just and egalitarian understanding of human and divine relationships. In this way, a necessary hermeneutical correction has been made by disconnecting the text from traditional moralising interpretations and refocusing it from the perspective of gender justice. Thus, rather than a text about law or forgiveness, the story is a call for the

deconstruction of patriarchal ideologies and the vindication of women, who have been historically subjugated.

Indeed, it has been found that the pericope denounces the exploitation of the woman and the double standards that resort to the Law, not to do justice, but to oppress those who are most vulnerable. The woman is treated as an 'object on display' and a 'trap' for Jesus, not as a subject with dignity. The scribes and Pharisees drag her away, expose her publicly and accuse her, without allowing her any defence or considering the man an accomplice. The story exposes the double standards of patriarchal society, where female adultery is severely punished, but male adultery is often ignored, unless it affects another man's property.

In reaction, Jesus transforms the woman from object to subject by entering into a dialogue with her, granting her honour and dignity. Contrary to societal expectations, Jesus treats men and women as equals, without gender differences. Jesus' sentence 'He who is without your sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her' shifts the focus from the woman's sin to the conscience of the accusers, revealing their own sinfulness. This sentence, a *hapax legoumenon* in the New Testament, is a critique of legalistic rigidity that lacks compassion.

From this perspective, the pericope can be a tool to denounce and criticise religious interpretations and traditions that perpetuate symbolic violence and the exclusion of women. It encourages questioning how religious structures can shape the perception of male superiority and female subordination. In addition, the story underlines the sacredness of women's humanity and their right to life and liberty. In this woman, Jesus defends the dignity of women, promoting their empowerment and development as 'responsible subjects of their own lives'. In this way, the pericope serves as a constant reminder that gender differences are not natural or divinely instituted, but rather social constructs that must be deconstructed and reconstructed on more just and egalitarian foundations. Ultimately, it proposes a questioning of the power structures and rigid interpretations of the law that oppress women. Jesus calls for compassion, equality and gender justice, inviting us to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies and to emulate their liberating attitude in the face of violence and exclusion.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Juan A. Casas-Ramírez: Conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, writing-original draft, writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

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