



Reading John 7:53–8:11 as a narrative against male violence against women

Author:

Michael O'Sullivan^{1,2,3}

Affiliations:

¹All Hallows College, Dublin City University, Ireland

²Department of New Testament, University of the Free State, South Africa

³Spirituality Institute for Research and Education (SplRE), Dublin, Ireland

Note:

Dr Michael O'Sullivan, a Jesuit priest, is Director of the MA in Christian Spirituality and Cluster Leader of PhD and MA by Research Spirituality Students at All Hallows College, Dublin City University. He is a Research Fellow of the Department of New Testament, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. Versions of this manuscript have been published in, *How Roman Catholic theology can transform male violence against women: Explaining the role of religion in cultural assumptions about gender* (Michael O'Sullivan 2010, Edwin Mellen, Lewiston, ID) and 'Male violence against women and the pastoral response of Jesus', in B. Flanagan & S. Thornton (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Guide to Pastoral Care*, pp. 80–93 (Michael O'Sullivan 2014, Bloomsbury, London).

Correspondence to:

Michael O'Sullivan

Email:

spiremos@gmail.com

Postal address:

28 Lower Hatch Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Male violence against women is at shocking levels in South Africa. According to Faul, 'A woman is killed by an intimate partner every eight hours, a probable underestimate because no perpetrator is identified in 20 percent of killings', whilst 'More than 30 percent of girls have been raped by the time they are 18'. Reeva Steenkamp's killing by her partner, Oscar Pistorius, came 'the day before she planned to wear black in a "Black Friday" protest against the country's excruciatingly high number of rapes' (Faul). The purpose of this article is to reread a key biblical text regarding male violence against women in order to highlight how Jesus would want us to respond to such violence. The text is John 7:53–8:11. The *NRSV: Catholic Edition* entitles the story 'The woman caught in adultery'. However, this title is problematic as it can lead to misleading readings of the text, as I will show, and so I have given it a different title, namely 'The woman threatened with stoning'.

Introduction

Whilst male violence against women is one of the most disturbing realities in our world, its pervasiveness in South Africa is truly shocking. In South Africa, 'A woman is killed by an intimate partner every eight hours, a probable underestimate because no perpetrator is identified in 20 percent of killings' (Faul 2013). Faul adds: 'More than 30 percent of girls have been raped by the time they are 18'. Reeva Steenkamp's killing by her partner, Oscar Pistorius, came the day before she planned to take part in a 'protest against the country's excruciatingly high number of rapes' (Faul 2013).

The purpose of this article is to reread a key biblical text regarding male violence against women in order to learn from Jesus how to respond to it. The text is John 7:53–8:11. The *NRSV: Catholic Edition* entitles the story 'The woman caught in adultery'. However, this title is problematic as it can lead to misleading readings of the text. In my view a more suitable title is 'The woman threatened with stoning'. It will be more helpful to you, the reader, if I give the text verbatim rather than paraphrasing it.

The woman threatened with stoning / John 7:53–8:11

Then each of them went home, whilst Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone against her'. And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir'. And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again'.

Interpreting the text¹

Since texts do not speak for themselves but have to be interpreted, a reader has to choose principles of interpretation and inner dispositions that can unlock the text's meaning in relation to his or her

1. On this text, see Kinukawa (1995:82–96); Schottroff (1995:177–203); O'Day (1992b:631–640); O'Day (1992a:293–297); Toensing (2003:159–172); Lee (1996:1–15); Saunders (1996:82–85); Malone (1985:33–35); Reinhartz (2000:454–55); Watson (1999:100–108); McDonald (1995:415–427); Moloney (1998:258–269); Young (1995:59–70); Wallace (1993:290–296); Ehrman (1988:24–44); Lightfoot (1960:345–348); and Brown (1966:332–338).

Dates: Received: 18 Mar. 2015 | Accepted: 18 May 2015 | Published: 14 Aug. 2015

How to cite this article: O'Sullivan, M., 2015, 'Reading John 7:53–8:11 as a narrative against male violence against women', *HTS Theologesie Studies/Theological Studies* 71(1), Art. #2939, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i1.2939>

Copyright: © 2015. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.



purpose in reading it. For that reason I choose to read the text with a feminist hermeneutic (O'Sullivan 2010:302–309). I also read it on its own terms without reference to its larger literary context, as O'Day (1992a:297) advocates, on the grounds that scholars are divided as to whether or not it belongs originally to the tradition of John's Gospel.²

The use of a feminist hermeneutic explains my choice of title for the text as I will read the story as a story of how the male Jesus in his capacity as saviour responds to the situation of a woman in danger of being stoned to death by other males, and on religious grounds.

A feminist hermeneutic is also attentive to the fact that the person who stands accused is a woman, that Jesus and her accusers are all men, and that there may be a link between the situation of the woman in the story and a bias against women in the society.³ It emphasises the value of standing with the woman in the story for the sake of how to read and respond to the text. Interpreting the text in this way one notices that the woman is in effect a 'non-person' (Toensing 2003:159). She has no name, is identified only by the charge brought against her (Toensing 2003:162), which reduces her to an unacceptable sexual object, and is treated like a passive object for debate, a public spectacle, and as bait to try and trap Jesus. The fact that she has no name and her story is placed in the Johannine text may be significant for interpreting the text since 'very often the symbolic characters in John ... are nameless, which enhances their power to represent collectivities without losing their particularity' (Schneiders 1999a:189). She is also on her own, without an advocate, among men with authority, authority that can kill women. Knowledge of the world behind the text⁴ informs the reader that she is part of an androcentric and kyriarchal society (Baab 1962:864–865; Leviticus 12:1–8; Mooney & De Hammond 1989:20–21; Saunders 1996:18–19; Witherington 1990:3–5, 8; Wordelman 1998:390, 396),⁵ that, 'however unconsciously, she touches a raw nerve at the heart' of such a society (Lee 1996:3), and that the Pharisees and scribes who accuse her belong to social and religious groups that excluded women. Given that they bring her to the Temple at a time when Jesus is teaching there, he may have been in the women's court (Witherington 1990:39), since women were confined to that court (Witherington 1990:8). However, I suggest that he was in the wide public area beyond the Temple buildings proper given that the text speaks of him having gone to, and not into, the Temple, where he teaches what appears to be a mixed crowd of people.⁶ In the Temple building women were confined to places that expressed and reinforced a view

of them as inferior beings to men (Witherington 1990:8). During menstruation and after giving birth they could not enter any part of the Temple.⁷ This message concerning the impurity of women's menstruation was reinforced in their consciousness, as well as in men's consciousness, by the prohibition on Jewish men entering the inner courts of the Temple if they were engaging in sexual relations with a menstruating woman (Wordelman 1998:396). Being brought to the area where the Temple building was situated, a building where religion regulated when, where, and how she could be present on the basis of her embodied female sexual body, and being charged within the precincts of the Temple in public with adultery, can be expected to have added to the humiliation, shame, and panic the woman must have felt.

Readers of the text with a feminist hermeneutics of the imagination can imagine the scribes and Pharisees arriving suddenly and with a great deal of noise and activity, with the traumatised woman, and interrupting Jesus's teaching, as though no delay can be countenanced in addressing what they want to bring to his attention. They act with authority, therefore, and a sense that what they have to say can take priority over anything he may have been saying to his listeners at that point. This gives the impression that what the woman is accused of is terribly serious indeed.⁸ Their sense of religious righteousness is likely to have been influenced by the inherited religious worldview behind the text of the story (Lee 1996:2). Although contemporary readers of the text cannot be sure of what scripture the scribes and Pharisees knew, it is very likely that religious people like them were influenced strongly by knowledge of the spousal theme in the Prophets (Barker 2002:322–326).⁹ According to Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the relationship between Israel and Yahweh could be conceived as one between spouses. Israel was a symbolic female spouse who became an adulterous woman and thus betrayed the trust and honour of a loving God, who was presumed to resemble a faithful husband.¹⁰ According to Ezekiel 23:46–49, this God ordered that Israel be stoned to death because of her infidelity and as a warning to all women.¹¹ As Lee (1996) says, 'No stronger metaphor for apostasy and idolatry could be found in these texts than

7. See Leviticus 12:1–8. The Roman Catholic practice of 'churching' for mothers, which was still prevalent among Catholic families up to Vatican II and the late 1960s, also comes to mind here. Although a ceremony of thanksgiving and blessing, it is believed to have originated in the Mosaic regulation as to purification. See The 1911 Classic Encyclopedia (n.d.) 1–2; see also O'Connor (1985:1–2) for accounts of how women in Ireland regarded or experienced churching.

8. Young (1995) argues that the Pharisees and scribes sought out Jesus for guidance in the hope that the death penalty could be avoided. This means, for him, that 8:6a is historically inaccurate in how it depicts the Pharisees, and so is an interpolation. Young cites Flusser and Becker in support of it being an interpolation. However, leaving aside whether it is an interpolation, or not, which is not decisive for a feminist interpretation, if the Pharisees were as caring about the woman and her life as he believes, then they could easily have sought out Jesus without making such a public spectacle of the woman. The fact that they proceed in this way also lends credence to the view that they are intent on discrediting Jesus and maybe even putting his life in danger, which makes the story resonate with his passion and death.

9. Lee (1996:3), however, is in no doubt that the prophetic literature with its emphasis on Israel as an adulterous female spouse was a powerful formative influence on Jewish society in the time of Jesus.

10. Hosea 1–3, 4:10, 12, 17–18; Jeremiah 2:1–3; 3:1–3; Ezekiel 16, 23. For a message of this kind concerning God and female sexuality in contemporary stories, see Imbens and Jonker (1992).

11. Although males are also part of Israel, the death and destruction of symbolic Israel is carried out 'so that all women may take warning' (23:48).

2. Schneiders (1999b), a Johannine scholar, does not treat this story in her book on John.

3. Women could not be scribes or Pharisees.

4. The world behind the text refers to the forces that shaped its production (see Schneiders 1999a:97–131).

5. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the term 'kyriarchy' to denote systems of male lordship.

6. On the layout of the Temple and its precincts see France (1999:528). Since it appears that Jesus is not speaking only to women, I am taking it that he and the others who were present would not have been in the women's court in the Temple.



adultery'.¹² Uncritical socialisation into and appropriation of such an understanding of the relationship between God and Israel, or of the history of the effects of such understanding – its efficacious history – would tend to lead people to be preoccupied with the sexuality of a woman, to perceive her through her sexuality as an actual or potential symbol of Israel's infidelity to God, and to the conviction that she has to be punished accordingly, if convicted of adultery.¹³ It would mean that the Pharisees and scribes in this story could also project the guilt for the wrongdoings in their own lives onto the woman, and deal punitively with these wrongdoings through their treatment of her. It could lead them to be uncritical about the extent to which they were seeking to uphold a destructive cultural notion of 'male honour' and its concomitant presumption that women were the property of men and subject, also, to their control.¹⁴ It could lead them to cover over their fear that wives might be adulterous with impunity.¹⁵

The influence of this world behind the text would also help to explain why there is no mention of the man (Kinukawa 1995:90).¹⁶ Although Deuteronomy prescribed stoning to death for men caught in adultery with a virgin already engaged to be married, and death by an unspecified means if the woman was already the wife of another man (Lv 20:10 and Dt 22:22–29, see Reinhartz 2000:455) – and stoning was the normal form of the death penalty for all types of adultery according to Ezek 16:38–40, and was still in practice in Jesus' time (Brown 1966:333) – the weighting against women of other parts of that tradition, and of the culture in general, was conducive to double standards where this part of the tradition was concerned (Creegan 2002:41–42).¹⁷

If, as seems very likely, the mentality of the Pharisees and scribes in this story was influenced negatively by texts such as those concerning unfaithful Israel as an adulterous spouse, then it can be presumed that they regarded themselves as upright and holy men carrying out their God-given religious duty in seeking to have the woman stoned, even if their primary objective was to trap Jesus (France 1999:529). Challenging Jesus concerning the woman, in the area of the

Temple, gave such religious belief a more intense character and raised the stakes for him.

Judging by this story Jesus has already been identified as someone to dispose of, and it is significant from a feminist perspective that a woman is used as bait for this purpose, because it suggests that Saunders is right to hold that the scribes and Pharisees were aware of 'his liberal attitude towards women' (Saunders 1996:83),¹⁸ which would have become well known. They wanted to use this knowledge to test their suspicion that he might, for her sake, oppose the law of Moses,¹⁹ which prescribed death for a woman caught in adultery.²⁰

The role of Jesus in the story is

that of a Jewish male whose responsibility to God, to the scriptures, and to the people is being evoked, at a moment when the woman already stares death in the face. (Schottruff 1995:184)

This raises the question, how will he as a male saviour act in relation to this woman, and the other men, in the story. What do his words and deeds communicate about the meaning and method of God's salvation in the violence-laden situation? Does he, for example, side with the other men against the woman, and seek with them to restore the kyriarchal honour of a people injured by the woman's alleged adultery (Schottruff 1995:184), or does he offer a counter-cultural way of being a man – and a woman – in his society and religious tradition by the way he perceives, relates to, and protects the woman? Does he uphold the understanding of the men that fidelity to God requires a violent sacrifice of the woman as punishment for her alleged sin, and for the preservation of the bio-gendered socio-cultural order,²¹ or does he oppose such an understanding which meant acting as an independent Jewish interpreter of the received scriptural tradition? (Schottruff 1995:184). Does he seek to counsel the woman about how to come to terms with the sentence of a violent death in the way that a chaplain today might do for someone on death row? Such counsel could take the form of how she might be an

18. It would be more accurate to denote Jesus' attitude towards women as a liberating one.

19. Watson (1999:100–108) offers a distinctive interpretation of this story. According to him, the woman in the story is a remarried divorcee, and as such offends against Jesus' teaching on divorce, which did not concur with the Mosaic Law. The trap for Jesus, therefore, is whether he will extend the Mosaic Law concerning death for an adulteress to a remarried divorcee. I am not persuaded by his argument, however. It does not seem plausible to me that the Pharisees and scribes could lead away a woman found with her new husband for the sake of using her against Jesus.

20. Whilst many commentators, including Saunders (1996), hold that Jesus in this story is also being tested to learn if he will say something that opposes the authority of the Romans, who did not, according to such commentators, allow Jews to carry out a death sentence, I am not convinced that this was the case. The text simply says at 8:6, 'so that they might have some charge to bring against him'. The story assumes they felt obliged to stone the woman. They declare at 8:5, 'in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women'. They could hardly accuse him of something they believed themselves. Watson (1999:101) makes similar points. Toensing (2003:163) holds that Roman Law would not necessarily have been usurped in cases of adultery. Young (1995:59–70), as I wrote above, goes against traditional explanations by arguing that the Pharisees actually wanted the woman to be spared. According to Young (1995:59–70), John 8:6a is an interpolation, but even if it is, this still does not change what I consider to be from a feminist perspective the central focus in the story, namely, where does Jesus stand in relation to a religious law that came into being under kyriarchal conditions of social existence and that called for a woman to be stoned to death who was judged to have committed adultery.

21. O'Day (1992b:634–635) points out that the men may have feared that wives might be adulterous with impunity.

12. Lee (1996:3).

13. Although stoning was prescribed as the form of death for betrothed virgins, but not for married women, Godet holds that where the law was silent, the punishment of stoning was inflicted. This view, he writes, is confirmed by Leviticus 20:2, 27 in relation to 20:10, where the law is silent on the form of death penalty to be imposed (Godet 1978:647).

14. See Kinukawa (1995:85, 87), Lee (1996:3) and Schottruff (1995:182–183) on the stoning of a woman in Iran in 1990 in relation to this story. The phenomenon of the killing of women for the sake of upholding patriarchal family honour in some parts of the world also comes to mind at this point.

15. O'Day (1992b:634–635) makes the point that the text could evoke this fear in male readers. See also Schottruff (1995:180) concerning similar speculation by Augustine regarding the early Church's resistance to accepting it.

16. Twohig-Moengangongo (1997:228) reports that Reginald, then a Nigerian student of theology at the Spiritan International School of Theology (SIST), shows how these double standards still apply today when he asks: 'Why in my home parish is an adulterous woman made to do public penance by kneeling before the altar during Sunday mass whilst there is no sign of the man – has he not also sinned?'

17. The reason why the kyriarchal law also sanctioned the stoning of the man was because the man had violated the honour and property of another man. The absence of the man, for Schottruff (1995:181), means that the text reflects a social praxis of getting rid of women by means of accusing them of adultery. See the story of Susanna, in Daniel 13, in which Susanna is the victim of an elaborate frame-up.



example of moral influence for others by going to her death with dignity, and a contrite heart. Does he make it clear to her that if the stoning is not carried out the religiously grounded socio-cultural order could be undermined? Does he seek to fortify her with words about how violent suffering embraced in the right spirit can be redemptive?

What Jesus does is to turn the situation around, which exemplifies the value of his maleness in enabling him to forward God's salvation. He 'makes the cross-over from one worldview to the other: from identification with righteous male authority to female "sinner"' (Lee 1996:12). The men are faced with their own sinfulness and depart quietly.²² Neither does Jesus condemn the woman. On the contrary:

Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you.'²³ Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

Learning from the Story

A number of points can be made about this story from the perspective of the aim of this article. Firstly, Jesus as the revelation of God's salvation does not sanction a violent death for the woman, and goes further by acting to save her from such a death. In doing so, he discloses a spirituality that moves him to reject a sacred system of sacrificial violence, especially where women were concerned, that formed part of the hegemonic strand in his religious tradition (Schneiders 2000:101). His spirituality also leads him to reject other death-dealing elements of meaning that the culture had formed and institutionalised historically in the society.²⁴ His response signifies that the authentic righteousness of God concerning God's saving meaning for relations between women and men is a transformative righteousness of salvation from such violence for all concerned.²⁵ His response means that the old order of the Fall, and the violence against women deriving from it, which is indicated in Gen 3:16, is being ushered out by a new order of saving love in Jesus (John Paul II 1988:34–36, 43).²⁶ This new order of redemption has implications not

22.Young (1995:59–70) argues that they depart because they had found in a young Jesus, who was also an innovative religious teacher, a way of not having to seek the death penalty, which the Mosaic Law demanded. For Young, the Pharisees at the time of Jesus were not in favour of the death penalty. I find his conjecture that the Pharisees and scribes were favourably disposed to being guided by Jesus concerning the Mosaic Law implausible. His argument also, as I wrote above, does not do justice to elements in the story that indicate a kyriarchal bias against the woman by the Pharisees and scribes. For example, they make her a public spectacle.

23.These words of Jesus also evoke the father's attitude in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke's Gospel, which are revelatory of God's attitude. However, there is also a significant difference between the two stories. Whilst both stories are revelatory of the compassion of God, we know that the son in Luke's story has lived a sinful life, whereas we do not know if the woman in John's story has sinned or been caught in what was regarded as a sinful act; we only know that powerful men bring such a charge against her.

24.It is important to point out that this statement is not intended to be anti-Semitic. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2000:115–136), in particular, has drawn attention to the dangers of articulating a Christian Jesus in a way that can be anti-Semitic. Jesus was a Jew and developed his understanding and practice of himself and his mission on a basis, also, of liberating elements in his received tradition (Schneiders 2000:99–101; Schottroff 1995:184; O'Sullivan 2010:190–191).

25.Watson (1999:104) gives, with approval, C.K. Barrett's citation of David Daube's (1978) point that this story illustrates Jesus' stance against the unfair treatment of women by men and their laws.

26.On the implied violence in the Genesis text see Thistlethwaite (1989:305). I am also reminded here of a young woman who suffered repeated beatings from her

only for relations between men and women, but also cultural and religious meanings and values, and social and ecclesial structures and institutions, in every age.²⁷ Its message to women is not the frightening warning of Ezek 23:46–49, but one that can be expressed instead in terms like these: 'Let all women be encouraged'. As Malone writes, there are 'no threats about the stones next time. No thundering declamations about sex and women and Eve ... Jesus looked up at her, not down on her' (Malone 1985:34).²⁸ Thistlethwaite adds that many women who have suffered male violence 'would echo the joy of the woman who exclaimed, "that's right! He (Jesus) broke the law for her!"' (Thistlethwaite 1989:307).

Jesus goes further still. All this time the woman has been living the traumatic violence of being consigned to silence as her life hung in the balance whilst her male accusers battled verbally with the male Jesus. We can only imagine what Jesus felt about this, but it is likely that it fostered in him what Lonergan calls the refinement of feeling that can pave the way for doctrinal development and corresponding decision (Lonergan [1973] 1990:320). Jesus now speaks to the woman, as a person, and in a kind way (Moloney 1998:261–262), which reflects the developmental cognitive and affective effect that her experience may have had on him in his humanity and spirituality.²⁹ His action empowers her to be heard into speech for the first time in the story.³⁰ By speaking, listening to, and hearing her, he treated her with the dignity, care and empowerment that corresponded to her as a human person, which contrasts strongly with how the kyriarchal Pharisees and scribes communicated with and related to her. In this way he also responded at the same time to her traumatic violence, which can register in the body in the form of felt terror, trembling, shock, numbness, and loss of speech.³¹ Such action confirms the value of him being a male saviour:

The Pharisees are tense ... [*Jesus*] accepts the woman openly and lovingly, as an adult and as a person ... he can handle the situation and the relationship with her because he has nothing to be afraid of in himself ... He must have completely accepted and

partner and who said to me at the time in 1990, 'If it hadn't been for Eve, this would not be happening to me'. It is important to point out, however, that women contributed to the work of salvation in Jesus, so that he should not be understood as a great hero on behalf of women, with no need to receive and learn from them in carrying out the work of salvation. I will return to this point when I refer to the story of the woman from Syrophenicia later on in my text.

27.Jesus' call to the scribes and Pharisees to face themselves as sinners in the context of how they perceive and treat the woman from within their understanding of their religious tradition means, for O'Day (1992b:637), that Jesus is inviting them 'to give up the categories by which they had defined and attempted to control life'.

28.These words of Malone take the charge against the woman at face value. I will return to this point of how the woman's situation may be understood.

29.It is also possible, of course, that Jesus' kindness and refinement of feeling may have been due more to an experience(s) of a kind God (O'Sullivan 2014:203–205).

30.Adrienne Rich coined this phrase of hearing women into speech and it became a key self-identifying way of proceeding of the feminist movement in the latter part of the last century. She also observed (Rich 1978:64), 'We have lived with violence for too long'.

31.As I stated above, elements such as these are some of the reasons why I am not persuaded by Young's (1995:59–70) argument that the Pharisees are actually concerned for the woman, and seek out Jesus in order to find a way around the death penalty. On traumatic violence, see Grant (2002:6). Stories of Jesus and women in dialogue are a feature of the Gospels. In John 4:1–42, for example, the 12 are amazed to find Jesus speaking with a woman.

integrated his own sexuality. Only a man who has done so, or at least begun to do so, can relate properly to women.³²

The response of Jesus in not confining himself to stopping the threat of fatal violence against the woman being acted out suggests that recourse to kyriarchal violence³³ against women in its manifold forms, and dimensions, must be rejected in the new order of saving love in Jesus, because it fails to perceive and treat women with the respect and regard that Jesus communicates to this woman. Religious meanings concerning sin and God's response to it that appear to justify such forms of violence must be similarly rejected. The action of Jesus, therefore, in this story contradicts, for example, what women sometimes have learned concerning God and women, namely, that the suffering of women is to be regarded as a test, trial or punishment from God in order to make them worthy for a salvation that might still be possible for them in an eternal life beyond death (O'Sullivan 2010:139–154).

Secondly, the story illustrates a biblical basis for, and an understanding of, the relationship between salvation and the situation of kyriarchal violence against women in the life of Jesus that offers a counter-witness within the biblical text against those parts that

frequently fail to supply women with resources for liberation; it [*the biblical text*] is often enough itself the problem, demonising women, degrading female sexuality, erasing women from the history of salvation, legitimating their oppression, and trivialising their experience. (Schneiders 1999a:182)

In this way, the story contributes to the liberation of the biblical text as a whole from its participation in violence against women, which is part of what is involved in the social and ecclesial transformation of kyriarchal violence against women (Schneiders 1999a:182).

Thirdly, the text is not simply a story concerning the past. It is also at some level the contemporary reader's story, 're-describing my world as challenged and transformed by the values of the reign of God' (Schneiders 1999a:173). It can do this because there is a 'world in front of the text', 'the world that the text projects ahead of itself and invites the reader to enter' (Schneiders 1999a:147), and which is unlocked as

32. See Maria Boulding's commentary on this story in Rees and others (1978:169). Moloney (1998:262) cites this comment from her commentary with approval. See also Jacobs-Malina (1994:158–66).

33. Strictly speaking the violence should be called male kyriarchal biosocial-gender-related violence, but I will avoid using such terminology and categorisation as it may be confusing. I derive the category 'biosocial-gender' on the basis of distinctions that need to be made between what I call 'bio-gender', 'bio-gender-identity', 'bio-gender role', and 'biosocial-gender'. Bio-gender emphasises the intimate connection between embodied appearance and so-called gender identity, and the possible mismatch that can exist between them. This intimate connection and possible mismatch means that persons are more accurately denoted as bio-gender-identity persons, where bio-gender-identity refers to the person's self-identification as a man or a woman. However, 'bio-gender' can refer to socially constructed bio-gender, and not only bio-gender-identity. Thus, biosocial-gender emphasises the close connection between embodied appearance, bio-gender-identity, and socialised bio-gender, and the latter can be rooted in conformity or critical appropriation. I prefer the category 'biosocial-gender-related violence' rather than 'biosocial-gender-based violence' to name the violence I have in mind because in order for biosocial-gender to be the basis of violence against women it would have to be, not only a major, but also the central, factor in what precipitated the violence. However, it can be difficult to distinguish in concrete instances between when that is the case, and when the violence is also driven strongly by factors like race, class, religion, ethnicity, nationality... (O'Sullivan 2010:16–20, 241–245).

readers come to it with new experience, feelings, questions, findings and disciplines (Okure 1992:221–232).³⁴ The ultimate reference of the text, in other words, is the situation of the contemporary reader, and the contemporary meaning of the text 'is not something added on to a basic literal meaning. It is intrinsic to the meaning of the text' (Schneiders 1982:59). The call of the text according to this way of understanding is to be receptive to its surplus meaning, and the interaction of that meaning with the 'effective historical consciousness' of the reader,³⁵ with the knowledge and decisions, in other words, that emerged since the text was written and that had a formative effect on the reader. This mode of interpretation yields an expanded meaning that is not confined by the consciousness and intention of its author, the receptive capacity of its first audience, or the actual world that the incarnate Jesus accomplished before he died in a life that was short, and subject to the historical character of existence (Schneiders 1999a:153, 163). The call of the text is to be faithful to the world of desire and possibility projected by Jesus in the text, which makes the text, not a static object from the past that exists in a detached state in the already out there now, and that must be continually reaffirmed as such, but a dynamic medium governed by the foundational praxis of authenticity in interpreters and implementers of their interpretations.

Interpreters and implementers of interpretations whose reflexive receptivity, relationality, reflectiveness, and responsibility in relation to the text and the level of knowledge in their time are characterised by the quality of authenticity function at the standard of objectivity. In doing so, they draw the text in the direction of the beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and love concerning Jesus and the situation of kyriarchal violence against women that can be transformative of their contemporary situation.

Thus, women who read this text today from a standpoint, for example, of having suffered 'bloodied noses, bruised ribs, and broken limbs' because of male violence against them,³⁶ and whose understanding of their situation has been affected by, for example, developments in civil society like the four United Nations conferences on the situation of women between 1975 and 1995, which were held respectively in Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia, as well as by the emergent feminist perspectives on Christianity since 1960 when Valerie Saiving (1979:25–42) wrote her groundbreaking article 'The human situation: A feminine view', can find that this story speaks to their situation in a way that transforms their consciousness concerning it, thus making further transformative responses to such a situation possible also. The interaction between their experience and this story can break open both their experience and the story. Instead of believing that God somehow ordains the violence against

34. She reads the text, not to establish what happened by the historical critical method, and then apply it to today, but to discern through the inner movement of integral interpretation which form of Christian discipleship is in fidelity to the world projected by the original Jesus movement.

35. The formulation comes from Hans Georg Gadamer (Schneiders 1999a:153, 163).

36. Thistlethwaite (1989:309).



them, they can be persuaded that a Jesus who intervened against powerful men for the sake of preventing the prescribed killing of a woman and healing her trauma, and who did so in order to highlight the true meaning of God's order of salvation, and at the risk of great danger to himself, must also want an end to contemporary violence against women and the forces in society and religion that contribute to it. He must also want instead the establishment of caring and considerate relations of mutuality and equality between men and women in Church and society.

On the basis that such an understanding of the text is rooted in their integral religious faith, readers with such faith know that the Jesus whom the illustrative text projects forward from the past in a mode of transformative engagement with the situation of male violence against women has been affirmed in his way of being by his resurrection by God and lives now as the risen Christ. In view of this saving meaning of the resurrection of Jesus, namely that his person and way of acting has an eternal destiny, women today, and also men, can appropriate the text as an offer of a mediated encounter with, not only the historical, or literary, Jesus (Schneiders 1999a:xxv–xxvi, xxx, 106), but also the risen Christ who must have an abiding concern to bring salvific transformation to the pervasive situation of kyriarchal violence against women in the world, at the level of contemporary meaning concerning that situation. Such a transformation, however, will also, necessarily, be a not-yet eschatologically fulfilled one.³⁷

This kind of encounter intensifies identification with the saving Jesus of the text in a way that can enhance the probabilities for soteriological change in history concerning the pertinent violence. It can do so when readers believe that God will also vindicate them for risks they may have to take to their own well-being out of love for this Jesus, now the risen Christ, in their time.

The problematic final words of the Story

In the light of the recovery thus far of the biblical story in a way that can be transformative of situations of kyriarchal violence against women today, the final words of Jesus to the woman, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again' evoke a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion. They do so because when they are placed alongside his call to the scribes and Pharisees to attend to sin in their own lives they suggest that he is placing the woman and the latter on the same level (Augustine 1990:1:311; O'Day 1992b:636–37). Such a perspective, however, reflects an individualised notion of sin and salvation that does not do justice to an understanding of reality as socially constructed. It is at variance, therefore, with my argument concerning a male Jesus who functions salvifically to transform the situation of male violence against women as one that is

37. As Schneiders (1999a:154) points out, the true role of biblical research is that of 'facilitator of salvific encounter with the Christ-event in Jesus'.

socially constructed. It is necessary, therefore, to re-read these closing words in the story with such a discrepancy in mind in order to offer an understanding of them that can be integrated into my overall argument.

On such a re-reading of the first words, 'Neither do I condemn you' need not be a problem. They can mean that Jesus was confident enough in his own religious experience and interpretation of the religious tradition of his people to function authoritatively in relation to the religious and cultural meanings constitutive of the situation he was faced with in this story. They can mean that he was either aware of and took into account the cultural world behind her action, if she actually did commit adultery, a world of female subordination and exploitation, or understood how she could have been falsely accused, if she did not do so. Similarly, the words, 'Go your way' need not be a problem, as they can be heard as words of empowering and expansive liberation for the woman who a short time before appeared to have no options at all left open to her.

However, the final words of the text, which follow these ones, namely, 'from now on do not sin again' could leave the reader with the message that Jesus believed she had acted sinfully. This would explain why he did not ask her what happened. Not asking her implies that he was accepting that she had acted as her accusers said, that the charge against her could not, for example, have been based on lying testimony, arise from a trap that was laid for her, be the result of a sexual assault, or of pressure to give way to what might have been a man of high status in a society where she was regarded as a mere woman.³⁸ It also implies that even if he did accept that she had done what they said, that the issue of how to interpret what it meant was not an issue for him. Had she acted with, or without consent? If with consent, what was the basis for it? Was it a protest against or a desire to escape from a bad marriage where she may have been a victim of violence?³⁹ Was it a way of asserting herself against what society with its degrading notions of the honour due to men and of her as the property of men demanded of her?⁴⁰ Was it an act done from loneliness and a need, also to give expression to her sexual desire in this way?⁴¹ Was she in serious economic need and did the adulterous act, which may have been part of an adulterous affair, offer her a way of gaining funds to take care of her family because her husband may have neglected

38. As Watson (1999:101) says, 'We are not told the evidence for this adultery. Two eye-witnesses were required who could testify to the unequivocal nature of the act, to the time when and the place where it occurred.' See the story of Susanna in Daniel, chapter 13 (mid-second century); see O'Sullivan (2002:10–11) for a contemporary illustration of this kind of case. On the possibility that the woman had been the subject of a trap laid for her by her husband, see Schottroff (1995:181, 196). McDonald (1995:425) points out that the woman is cast as actually guilty of immoral behaviour, but that this may be an assumption by her male accusers.

39. Witherington (1984:21), following Daube, and Blinzler, holds that the woman is married.

40. According to Kinukawa (1995:85) where she refers to adultery in Jesus' time, 'women were simply not taken to be human beings with rights equal to those of husbands or fathers'. She believes that the action of the woman is most likely to have been a form of protest against her situation as a woman, and is influenced in her conclusion by her knowledge of 'the history of the suffering of women on account of the arbitrary violence of men – a history played out in ancient Israel and also in Japan and other Asian countries' (Kinukawa 1995:94).

41. For example, a married woman I knew, who was being neglected by her husband, told me that she had sexual relations with an in-law for these reasons one evening.

them?⁴² Had she been taken advantage of through being prevailed upon psychologically to enter into sexual relations with a man in a society where women felt they had to give way to men, especially if the man was also more prominent socially in the society than her husband, as the man in this instance – if he existed – may have been? Not attending to considerations like these would suggest that Jesus did not appreciate all the factors that may have been involved in her action, if she had committed adultery, and how they would have affected her freedom, and so her capacity to sin, in the situation.⁴³ The question also arises, why did he not speak with her about what she may have had to go back to, and explore with her what authentic empowerment in relation to it would mean, and how this could become a reality for her, rather than telling her to go on her way and not to sin again?

Conclusion

Questions such as these suggest that whilst a great deal can be learned from the biblical Jesus regarding how to proceed in relation to male violence against women, more may be needed. I have considered various possible answers elsewhere to the questions I have raised here, in particular that the final words may not be from Jesus but are an addition to the text (O'Sullivan 2010). Suffice it to say here that in a similar way to how the story of the Syrophenician woman discloses that Jesus changed in his consciousness concerning himself and his mission, the canonical story of the woman threatened with fatal stoning may reflect a level of consciousness in Jesus concerning the situation of male kyriarchal violence against women in society that he later superseded. In any event, the fidelity of the reader to Jesus in the story included in John's Gospel is grounded, as I have indicated already, in contemporary praxis of integral religious authenticity, and not fundamentalism nor, either, earlier versions of what the historically situated desire for authenticity arrived at. This is so because a text is not a 'static object' but a 'dynamic medium' (Schneiders 1989:5) and because the dynamic praxis of authentic subjectivity is the objective route to beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness and love. Such grounding can lead to received meanings concerning the story having to be transcended under the influence of new research findings, new questions, and new refinements of feeling, et cetera. In this way a spirituality of creative fidelity to 'the ongoing self-making of the human race' by those who are 'friends' of Jesus⁴⁴ and have 'the ethos of Christ' (McDonald 1995:427) provides evolutionary empowerment for dealing with male violence against women in contemporary contexts.

42. Did she exemplify the 'feminisation of poverty', where the poverty of women can be due to their gendered situation in society. I met women in Nairobi, Kenya in 1997 for whom relationships with men were a means to secure money to feed their families after their husbands had neglected them and given themselves to excessive drinking, for example.

43. Besides sin at the level of knowledge and consent, there are also sinful effects. These effects can be sinful in terms of what they do to the intentions of God, even though those who contribute to these effects may have done so without being aware of, or intending, it.

44. See Schneiders (1981:76–92) regarding redemption being a transformative work of friendship that establishes relationships of equality and mutuality.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Arai, S., 1988, *Sinyaku Seisho no Joseikan (Women in the New Testament)*, Iwanami, Tokyo.
- Baab, O.J., 1962, 'Woman', in G.A. Buttrick, K. Gerge & C. Butterick (eds.), *The interpreter's dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4: R-Z, pp. 864–867, Abingdon, Nashville, TN.
- Barker, M., 2002, 'The Bible Jesus knew', *Priests and People* 16, 322–326.
- Barrett, C.K., 1978, *The Gospel according to John*, 2nd edn., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Brown, R.E., 1966, *The Gospel according to John I–XII*, Anchor Bible, Doubleday, Garden City, NY.
- Creagan, N.H., 2002, 'Adultery', in C. Clark Kroeger & M.J. Evans (eds.), *The IVP women's Bible commentary*, pp. 41–42, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Daube, D., 1978, 'Biblical landmarks in the struggle for women's rights', *Juridical Review* 23, 177–197.
- Ehrman, B.D., 1988, 'Jesus and the adulteress', *New Testament Studies* 34, 24–44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500022189>
- Faul, M., 2013, 'South Africa violence against women rated highest in the world', in *Huffington Post*, viewed 16 February 2015, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/08/south-africa-violence-against-women_n_2837804.html
- France, D., 1999, 'Jewish religion in New Testament times', in P. Alexander & D. Alexander (eds.), *The lion handbook to the Bible*, 3rd rev. and exp. edn., pp. 528–533, Lion, Oxford.
- Godet, F.L., 1978, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Grant, R.W., 2002, 'The healing of violence', *Human Development* 23(4), 5–7.
- Imbens, A. & Jonker, I., 1992, *Christianity and incest*, transl. J.E.L. Imbens-Fransen & C.K. Jonker-de-Putter, Burns and Oates, Kent.
- Jacobs-Malina, D., 1994, 'Gender, power, and Jesus' identity in the Gospels', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24, 158–166. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/014610799402400403>
- John Paul II, 1988, *Mulieris dignitatem: On the dignity of woman*, Veritas, Dublin.
- Kinukawa, H., 1995, 'On John 7:53–8:11: A well-cherished but much-clouded story', in F.F. Segovia & M.A. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this place: Social location and Biblical interpretation in global perspective*, vol. 2, pp. 82–96, Fortress, Minneapolis, MN.
- Lee, D.A., 1996, 'Women as "sinners": Three narratives of salvation in Luke and John', *Australian Biblical Review* 44, 1–15.
- Lightfoot, R.H., 1960, *St. John's Gospel: A commentary*, C.F. Evans (series ed.), Oxford University Press, London.
- Loneragan, B.J.F., [1973] 1990, *Method in theology*, Darton, Longman & Todd, New York, NY.
- Malone, M.T., 1985, *Women Christian: New vision, religious education division*, Wm. C. Brown, Dubuque.
- McDonald, J.I.H., 1995, 'The so-called Pericope De Adultera', *New Testament Studies* 41, 415–427. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500021561>
- Moloney, F.J., 1998, 'Excursus on John 7:53–8:11', in D.J. Harrington (ed.), *The Gospel of John*, pp. 258–269, Liturgical, Collegeville, PA. (Sacra Pagina series.)
- Mooney, R.E. & De Hammond, M.T., 1989, *Jesus, las mujeres y yo: un estudio bíblico para mujeres*, UCA Editores, San Salvador.
- O'Connor, A., 1985, 'Listening to tradition', in L. Steiner-Scott, Personally Speaking, ed. Liz Steiner-Scott, Attic, Cork, viewed 08 March 2005, from <http://www.iol.ie/cassidy/ARC/churching.html>
- O'Day, G.R., 1992a, 'John', in C.A. Newsom & S.H. Ringe (eds.), *The women's Bible commentary*, pp. 293–297, SPCK, London.
- O'Day, G.R., 1992b, 'John 7:53–8:11: A study in misreading', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, 631–640. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3267436>
- Okure, T., 1992, 'The will to arise: Reflections on Luke 8:40–56', in M.A. Oduyoye & M.R.A. Kanyoro (eds.), *Will to arise: Women, tradition, and the Church in Africa*, pp. 221–232, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY.
- O'Sullivan, M., 2000, 'The woman who converted Jesus', *Sacred Heart Messenger*, March.
- O'Sullivan, M., 2002, 'The case of Safiyatu Huseini in Nigeria', *America*, 18 March, pp. 10–11.
- O'Sullivan, M., 2010, *How Roman theology can transform male violence against women: Explaining the role of religion in shaping cultural assumptions about Gender*, Edwin Mellen, Lewiston, ID.
- O'Sullivan, M., 2014, 'Thoughts on life and living', in C. Conlon (ed.), *Saol: Thoughts from Ireland on life and living*, pp. 203–205, Collins, Cork.



- O'Sullivan, M., 2015, 'Male violence against women and the pastoral response of Jesus', in B. Flanagan & S. Thornton (eds.), *The Bloomsbury guide to pastoral care*, pp. 80–93, Bloomsbury, London.
- Rees, D. and others, 1978, *Consider your call – A theology of monastic life today*, SPCK, London.
- Reinhartz, A., 2000, 'John 8:3–11, adulterous woman', in C. Meyers (ed.), *Women in scripture*, pp. 454–455, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Rich, A., 1978, 'Natural resources', in A. Rich, *Dream of a common language: Poems 1974–1977*, pp. 60–67, W.W. Norton, New York, NY.
- Rotelle, J.E. (ed.), [St. Augustine], 1990, *The works of Saint Augustine: A translation for the 21st century: Sermons*, part 3, transl., with notes, Edmund Hill, New City Press, New York, NY.
- Saiving, V., 1979, 'The human situation: A feminine view', in C.P. Christ & J. Plaskow (eds.), *Womanspirit rising: A feminist reader in religion*, pp. 25–42, Harper and Row, New York, NY.
- Saunders, R., 1996, *Outrageous women, outrageous God: Women in the first two generations of Christianity*, E.J. Dwyer, Alexandria.
- Schottruff, L., 1995, *Lydia's impatient sisters: A feminist sacral history of early Christianity*, transl. Barbara Rumscheidt, SCM, London.
- Schneiders, S.M., 1981, 'The foot washing (John 13:1–20): An experiment in hermeneutics', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, 76–92.
- Schneiders, S.M., 1982, 'The Paschal imagination: Objectivity and subjectivity in New Testament interpretation', *Theological Studies* 3, 52–68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/004056398204300103>
- Schneiders, S.M., 1989, 'Feminist ideology criticism and Biblical hermeneutics', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 1, 3–10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/014610798901900102>
- Schneiders, S.M., 1999a, *The revelatory text: Interpreting the New Testament as sacred scripture*, 2nd edn., The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, PA.
- Schneiders, S.M., 1999b, *Written that you may believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, Herder and Herder, Crossroad, New York, NY.
- Schneiders, S.M., 2000, *With oil in their lamps: Faith, feminism, and the future*, Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality, Paulist, Mahwah, NJ.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E., 1984, *In memory of her: A feminist theological reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Crossroad, New York, NY.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E., 1992, *But she said: Feminist practices of Biblical interpretation*, Beacon, Boston, MA.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E., 1994, *Jesus: Miriam's child, Sophia's prophet: Critical issues in feminist Christology*, SCM, London.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E., 2000, *Jesus and the politics of interpretation*, Continuum, New York, NY.
- Thistlethwaite, S.B., 1989, 'Every two minutes', in J. Plaskow & C.P. Christ (eds.), *Weaving the visions: New patterns in feminist spirituality*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, CA.
- Toensing, H.J., 2003, 'Divine intervention or divine intrusion? Jesus and the Adulteress in John's Gospel', in A.-J. Levine & M. Blickenstaff (eds.), *A feminist companion to John*, pp. 159–172, Sheffield Academic, London.
- Tolbert, M.A., 1992, 'Mark', in C.A. Newsom & S.H. Ringe (eds.), *The women's Bible commentary*, pp. 263–274, SPCK, London.
- The 1911 Classic Encyclopedia n.d., *Home*, viewed 08 March 2005, from http://27.1911encyclopedia.org/C/CH/CHURCHING_OF_WOMEN.htm
- Twohig-Moengangongo, C., 1997, 'An encounter with Africa', *The Way* 37, 219–231.
- Wallace, D.B., 1993, 'Reconsidering "the story of Jesus and the adulteress reconsidered"', *New Testament Studies* 39, 290–296. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500022852>
- Watson, A., 1999, 'Jesus and the adulteress', *Biblica* 80, 100–108.
- Witherington, B. III., 1984, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Witherington, B. III., 1990, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511555183>
- Wordelman, A.L., 1998, 'Everyday life: Women in the period of the New Testament', in C.A. Newsom & S.H. Ringe (eds.), *The women's Bible commentary*, pp. 390–396, SPCK, London.
- Young, B.H., 1995, "'Save the adulteress!'" Ancient Jewish Responsa in the Gospels?', *New Testament Studies* 41, 59–70. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500022943>