

Prostitutes' and 'Prostitution'—What Does John 8:1–11 Say About Them?

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1. Prostitutes and Gentlemen

In the 1970s, the so called Gi-sang tourism through which Japanese exploited poor Asian or Korean women as sexual playthings became a social problem. At that time, Korean Christian women and women's movement groups took the issue and worked very hard to stop such sex tourism. Not only did they make a public disclosure of the miserable life of prostitutes (Gi-sang), but they also lobbied against the Korean government who gave tacit permission to the Gi-sang tourism.

I visited Thailand for the first time in 1989. There I spoke with a staff member of a women's organization working for prostitutes and found that their activity was somewhat different from that of their Korean counterparts. That was when Thailand was being engulfed, like Korea of the 1970s, by the process of industrialization and urbanization, which caused many poor people from rural areas to swarm to Bangkok, forcing a great number of destitute women to

resort to prostitution for sheer survival. I visited the office of the organization to find its slogan "No Condom, No Sex" written up large. I asked what they did for the poor women. They answered that they taught the women not to have intercourse with foreigners who refused to use condoms and that they taught them English to make sure that the women got the correct pay from the foreigners.

I decided that their activity was different from that of the Korean women's organizations whose object was to exterminate the problem of prostitution altogether. I asked the Thai workers why they did not aim to grapple with the problem radically. Wasn't teaching them the use of condoms or the English language compromising with the basic issue? The lady who had been kindly explaining the work of her organization exploded with anger and exclaimed: "I've no idea about how to get rid of the problem altogether. But if the men of your country cease to come here, the problem may be resolved."

I found out the root of the problem then and there. Among the foreigners who looked for prostitutes on the Papon Street in Bangkok night after night Korean men constituted a majority. I was deeply ashamed. Since returning to Korea from Bangkok, I have made it a point to ask the people who called the prostituting women 'harlots': "Do the women do it alone? Why do you say nothing about the men who prostitute with the women? Probably, they get on

cheerfully as 'gentlemen'. What do you think made the women resort to prostitution in the first place?"

Today, many women from poor Asian countries lead miserable lives as prostitutes. We seldom ponder why they live the kind of life, yet we summarily condemn and despise them. The Gospel according to John tells the story of a woman caught in the act of adultery. Here the male partner of the woman is nowhere to be found, but only the woman is dragged into the midst of Jewish men who want to stone her to death. I want to see how Jesus treated her and what he told her, hopefully as a way of changing our view of prostituting women and of exploring ways and means of eradicating the whole problem of prostitution.

2. The 'Anti-adultery Act' as a Guarantee of Male Property Rights

The story of the woman condemned by scribes and Pharisees for adultery appears in St. John's Gospel, chapter 8, verse 11. Most male theologians insist that though a fragment of this is mentioned in some manuscripts of the first century it is absent a thousand years thereafter in the Patristic or Greek documents.^{[1\)](#)} They say that this story was not in the original Gospel of St. John, but was in an apocryphal document, and therefore of little importance.^{[2\)](#)} Nevertheless, they agree that the story has been used by the Christian church

as an indication of what is proper when it comes to attitudes towards adulterous sinners.^{[3\)](#)}

The Gospel does not tell the name or the age of the condemned woman, nor about her family background. It says nothing about how she got into the situation. She has just committed adultery, is brought along by the scribes and Pharisees to Jesus to be stoned to death according to the Mosaic law (Jn 8:1-5). A male theologian defines her merely as a 'fallen woman.'^{[4\)](#)} Some women theologians say that "she may be a natural flapper," or "may have had a history of debauchery."^{[5\)](#)}

Such comments or suppositions are quite irrelevant to the first century Jewish social system which is the background of the text. In the Jewish society of the time, a woman was not a free 'person' but a piece of man's property like male servants and female servants or cattle.^{[6\)](#)} The polygamic system allowed a Jewish man to lawfully have a number of concubines aside from his wife, and to buy women with money for sexual gratification (Dt 21: 11-17). When a man raped a virgin, he could get away with it by paying fifty shekels to the girl's parents and marrying her against her will (Dt 22: 28-29). Moreover, he could use money, power, and force to seize another man's fiancée or wife and even his father's second wife to gratify his desire (Dt 22:30). The Jewish law defined violation of another man's wife as 'adultery' and said, "You must not give your

marriage bed to your neighbour's wife." They made it a criminal offence, because that would constitute a violation of one's neighbour's property rights.

Seen from this point of view, it is clear that the Jewish idea of 'adultery' derives not so much from moral or ethical grounds as from the male-centered concept of the security of man's property rights. The anti-adultery rules and laws, obviously made to suit the interest of men, were oppressive to women. A man's virginity was not an issue, but a woman's virginity was a matter that could be punished by death. The Deuteronomic laws obligated a woman to show evidence of virginity upon marriage, or she could be stoned to death (Dt 22: 21). If a husband doubted his wife's virginity after marriage, he could make her drink bitter water and, though she was not guilty, she had to suffer her thigh to shrivel (Nb 5:11-31).

Punishment for a man who committed adultery by violating another man's fiancée or a married woman was, from the woman's point of view, absurd. The Deuteronomic laws commanded that when adultery took place between a man and another man's fiancée not in the 'field' but 'in the city' both the violating man and the violated woman should be stoned to death (Dt 22: 23-24), because the woman did not cry for help in the town. When a married man violates another man's wife, the man was to be killed, and the violated (and therefore innocent) woman as well (Dt 22: 22).

Under such fearful patriarchal systems of law and discipline, no Jewish woman could contemplate on her own free initiative having an adulterous relationship with a man.^{[7\)](#)} In Jewish society, adultery was committed entirely by men. But later the sin came to be imputed to the women who "were deserted by their husbands, and thereby forced to seek other men." They said that women were responsible for the sin of adultery because they tempted men to sin!^{[8\)](#)} Then again, Jewish men turned their innocent wives away, and when the discarded women lived with other men in order to survive, their still-living husbands condemned the women for 'adultery'.^{[9\)](#)} It is all too evident from what we have considered that the accused woman was not an ordinary 'prostitute' or a 'fallen woman' or a mere flapper, but a man's fiancée or a woman raped by another man, or appropriated for sexual pleasure.^{[10\)](#)} Nevertheless, it is only the woman who is condemned when the punishment calls for being stoned to death. No defence, nor a final statement!

In fact, in Jewish society, man's 'prostitution' was widely tolerated while 'adultery' was not. Abraham, the ancestor of faith, and Jacob had concubines besides their wives. They also had female slaves used for child-bearing purposes (Gn 16: 1-16, 30: 1-13). Biblical authors do not condemn either of them for 'adulterous acts'. Jewish men entered the land of Canaan and had intercourse with Gentile 'temple prostitutes', and on the pretext of performing 'bridal rites' exploited young women about to be married for sexual pleasure. True, Hosea criticized the prostitution of such men in connection with the

worship of Baal, but in Israel men got away with their acts of prostitution without any legal hindrance.^{[11\)](#)}

Where was the man who was with the woman in the scene of adultery? Was he innocent? No! In view of Jesus' proclamation, he could not be innocent, but guilty. Jesus denounced the contemporary system of laws and conventions and defined men's acts of prostitution condoned under the system of polygamy as adultery. Jesus condemned as 'already committing adultery in his heart' any man who looked at a woman lustfully.^{[12\)](#)} Jesus also said that a man who gave his wife a writ of dismissal according to the law and married another woman committed adultery. Furthermore, the men who 'on the pretext of the law let their innocent wives commit adultery' commit adultery themselves. They were unjust men who made innocent people stumble (Mt 18: 6-9).^{[13\)](#)} In view of the proclamation of Jesus, the man who was with the woman accused of adultery, as shown in St. John's Gospel, was not innocent. He was an adulterer who violated another man's wife and made powerless women stumble.^{[14\)](#)}

3. The Verdict of Jesus

Let us now consider Jesus' judgment. Was the woman 'accused of adultery' guilty? The text of John 8: 1-11 was a piece of tradition mentioned only in a few early manuscripts and documents. The Church Fathers knew of this text, but left it out. It was taken up in the 10th century Codex Bezae. The text was

suppressed because they were afraid that Jesus' unconditional forgiveness might encourage women's fornication. Scholars affirm that the passage ended with "Neither do I condemn you" (Jn 8: 11a). But for those who shared the concern with the Fathers, church editors later added 11b ("Go away and don't sin any more") to the Gospel which remains standing today.^{[15\)](#)} Scholars point out John 8:1-11 is stylistically different from the rest of the Gospel and treat it separately. The text is a tradition circulated apart from the Gospel, to be true, but the author of the Gospel inserted it between 7: 1-53 and 8: 12-20 for a certain deliberate purpose.

Scribes and Pharisees come to Jesus who was teaching at the synagogue and bring a woman in order to test him: "Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery; and Moses has ordered us in the Law to condemn women like this to death by stoning. What have you to say?" Perhaps they were watching the scene of adultery in order to bring the woman along? In any case, they used the woman to trap Jesus with the Law of Moses. If Jesus tells them to let the woman free, he thereby violates the Law. But if Jesus tells them to stone the woman in accordance with the Law, he goes back on what he has been teaching, and, besides, violates the Roman law which allows only Roman judges to condemn people to death.^{[16\)](#)}

Jesus said nothing, bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger.^{[17\)](#)} As the Pharisees persisted, Jesus said, "If there is one who has not

sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." (Jn 8:7). Jesus did not say that one who has never so much as thought of committing a sin should throw a stone at her, nor was he saying the words as a general statement, nor again did he suggest that anyone who has not actually committed adultery is bound to commit adultery in his heart.¹⁸⁾ Jesus did not say any of those things. Jesus was thoroughly exposing the injustice of those who accused the woman.

The scribes and Pharisees were well aware of the Levitical injunction to kill both the man and the woman (Lv 20:10, Dt 22: 22, 24), yet dragged only the woman out. They knew that the accused had a right to defend him/herself before judgment (Jn 7:51), yet they refused to give the accused a chance to speak for herself before stoning her to death. It was they who mistreated, sexually harassed, and sexually violated the woman. The men justified themselves by bringing only the woman along. They were 'murderers' determined to kill the woman and Jesus. Jesus rebuked the men who wanted to stone the woman to death by telling them that one who had not sinned should be the first to throw a stone. At Jesus' command, the men went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest. Jesus rose up and asked the woman: "Has no one condemned you?" She answered, "No one, sir." Jesus ends his dialogue with "Neither do I condemn you" (8:11). That 8:11b ("Go away, and don't sin any more") was an interpolation by later Fathers of the church has already been mentioned. Neither here nor anywhere else did Jesus ever accuse prostitutes as 'sinners.'¹⁹⁾ Condemning the woman accused of adultery as a sinner and telling

her not to sin again does not agree with the whole tenor of chapters 7 and 8 of the Gospel.

Let us make this point clear. Is the woman accused by the scribes and Pharisees reported in 8:1-11 innocent? Is she guilty? We affirm the innocence of the woman from the way the audience of Jesus' teaching, who witnessed the judgment, as well as the scribes and Pharisees who were watching the scene, reacted to the event. None of them threw a stone to the woman, but everyone went away. They confirmed the woman's innocence. But Jesus' statement that he did not condemn her either was final. The Jewish men accused the woman of being an adulteress, but Jesus saw that the woman was being condemned as a sinner by man-made rules, and also that they wanted to get him by using her. The woman was being accused by the men's acts of prostitution tolerated by the unjust system of the law and their unjust tricks. Therefore, Jesus acquitted the woman, but judged the men guilty.

What does this verdict of Jesus tell us today? To establish the principles of 'adultery' or 'adulterers' through his words, as reported in John's Gospel, was far from his intention. He did not judge the woman guilty of adultery, and forgave her instead. The Fathers mistook Jesus, as people after them have done, for condoning the woman's act of adultery. Jesus did not wish to see her caught in the act again and brought along for judgment. What Jesus wanted was to do

away with the men's unjust acts in the Jewish society of lusting after women and of making sexual playthings of them.

Many people today no more realize the crucial lesson of Jesus' verdict reported in the 8th chapter of St. John's Gospel than the early Fathers did. They misinterpret the text as saying that Jesus regarded the woman as an adulteress but forgave her on condition that she repented. They make so much of her 'adultery.' We see in those people the living image of the old scribes and Pharisees who, while freely 'prostituting' and committing 'adultery' themselves, impute the responsibility to the women, condemning them as adulteresses who deserve to be stoned to death.

As a matter of fact, the situation of the 'adulteress' is not unlike that of the women of today who, struggling under the yoke of male-centered patriarchal systems and moral rules, have fallen into the position of men's objects of sexual desires. The 'comfort women' trampled under the foot of Japanese colonialism and military culture, the so-called 'western whores' deriving from the division of the country, the 'body sellers' promoted by the government's policy of 'Gisaeng (geisha) tourism', 'sexually harassed and violated women' during the military dictatorship – these women have been condemned as 'dirty women,' 'adulteresses' and 'sinners' not only by men, but also by 'respectable' women.

Having listened to Jesus' verdict, we should not judge women 'by their appearances, brand and accuse them as 'adulteresses.' On the contrary, emulating Jesus who acquitted the accused woman, we should bear witness to their innocence. We should testify that the humiliated and despised women are indeed 'innocent women' and that they take upon themselves the burden of sin, and of the unjust history of the divided Korean peninsula. We should go on to release them of their insufferable burden.

Not only those women! We see young girls turning in droves into prostitutes. They are the victims of the current competitive educational system. Recently, a television programme showed a father condemning and vilifying his own daughter who had run away from home and become a barmaid. We must ask: What made the girl become a barmaid? Lurking behind the girl's fall, are there not men's acts of prostitution, their greed, their desire to make sexual playthings of women? Is there not the capitalist sexual industry driving women out to the sex market?

Jesus condemns socially well-placed 'gentlemen' of today guilty of adultery. Jesus condemns also those who join the company of men who vilify the girl, saying that the girl's plight has nothing to do with them. Men cover up their own greed and acts of adultery, uphold their own moral rules and systems of value when throwing a stone to the girl. Jesus tells such men to turn away from the desire to make women the objects of their sexual gratification. Jesus tells them

to discard once and for all the social system, the patriarchal culture, and the capitalist system of sexual entertainment, lest their own wives and daughters should be caught in the act of adultery and brought along for judgement.

4. Conclusion: For an Alliance of Asian Women

We have considered the Johannine text concerning the woman accused of the sin of adultery who was threatened to be stoned to death. We have seen in the man who ran away from the scene of adultery a typical man who lusts after women, ready to make women the object of sexual gratification or possession, reproaching women from a lofty ethical and moral standpoint.

Therefore, members of Korean women's organizations are resolved to eradicate not so much the problem of 'prostituting women', as the evil of prostituting men. In order to eradicate the evil of prostitution from this country, all the male-centered systems and laws which justify prostitution and, by so doing, amass wealth and pleasure should be radically reformed. At the same time, women should avoid being overcome by momentary temptations or by false cultures of sexual liberation, and be determined to realize a life of dignity and integrity. For this purpose and in order to secure women's integrity, the women of Asia should unite across national boundaries. Asian prostitution ultimately derives not from ethical deprivation but from Asian poverty, so that, I think, Asian

women should unite and fight together to resolve the problems of poverty, inequality, injustice and patriarchal systems as much as the evil of prostitution.