Writing On The Ground: The Puzzle In John 8:1-11

Paul S. Minear
Guilford, Connecticut

Recently I published an essay in which I examined a puzzle that has intrigued interpreters of the Apocalypse: how to interpret the episode of the earth coming to the help of the woman in the wilderness by swallowing the water that poured from the mouth of the serpent-dragon. It was the coincidence of the term earth (gē) in the two texts that called my attention to a similar puzzle in the Gospel of John.

In the famous pericope dealing with a case of adultery (John 8:1-11), Jesus is pictured as stooping down twice to write on the ground (gē). Although some exegetes treat this gesture as quite unimportant, others view it as important, though few are content with current conjectures as to its precise significance. The purpose of this essay is to explore a possibility which, if it should be near the mark, would enhance the significance not only of the gesture itself but of the pericope as a whole.

Let me begin by agreeing with three conclusions that represent a wide scholarly consensus. First, scholars are virtually unanimous in holding that this story was not originally a part of the Fourth Gospel. It should therefore be dealt with, at least initially, apart from its present location. (The NRSV places the story within double brackets but leaves it in its traditional location.) Second, many scholars believe that the story circulated widely among early Christian circles in a form shaped by oral tradition. The story still bears the marks of oral circulation during the early period when the Synoptic Gospels were taking shape. Third, the story represents a mixture or a fusion of two specific forms that were often found in this oral tradition, one a controversy or pronouncement story and the other a symbolic prophetic gesture.

It is not difficult to discern the components of the controversy-form: the question about the law of Moses that set a trap for Jesus; his two answers, one addressed to the adversaries and the other to the adulteress, answers that neatly sprang a trap on the adversaries and allowed Jesus to escape unscathed, at least for the moment. Exegetes have little difficulty in coping with this form, in part because of its similarity
to debates in the Synoptics over the same issues between the same opponents. Whatever meaning there is appears to lie near the surface of the narrative.

The pericope, however, poses greater difficulty when it is viewed as a symbolic prophetic gesture. The marks of this form are located primarily in the two actions of Jesus in stooping, in writing on the ground, and then in rising to declare his verdicts, first to the accusers and then to the accused. Potentially this action has many prophetic and symbolic nuances, but it is far from easy to recapture the precise penumbra of overtones that shaped the narrative in the original period of oral circulation.

When we place the pericope under the microscope, it becomes obvious that if these two actions of Jesus were omitted, the biographical narrative would move more smoothly from the question posed to the answers given. Because these actions twice interrupt the flow of the debate, unnecessarily separating answers from questions, interpreters must ask why the narrator took listeners (it is oral tradition, remember) through such a gratuitous detour unless there was a desire to call attention to deeper meanings in the double gesture. What did the narrator have in mind? What motives are possibly involved? Not only does the gesture divert the form of the story from that of a forensic debate over the law; the interruption invests the action with a hidden and mysterious significance. In a controversy in which one notes a striking economy in the use of words, no word being wasted, many words seemed to be wasted here, that is, unless they were designed to call attention to some deeper meanings in those actions.

Many commentators, however, have accorded little significance to these actions of Jesus. To Edwyn Hoskyns, for example, "the gesture of Jesus means no more than that he will not in their presence give a judgment." C.K. Barrett agreed that the action "was simply a refusal to pronounce judgment." How strange to say this when Jesus in fact did give a judgment to both parties involved, though that judgment, as usual, surprised both parties. Raymond Brown concluded, after canvassing various solutions, that the act of writing on the ground "adds nothing important." Rudolph Schnackenburg was less inclined to dismiss its potential significance. "It is at least a sym-