

Teaching Points

John 7:53-8:11 presents us with a bit of a difficulty. Most Bibles have a footnote indicating the absence of these verses in the earliest manuscripts. Some translations put brackets around the whole section to denote the same thing.

In short, we believe that these verses were not part of the original work that John wrote. So how did they come to appear in our Bibles? It seems likely that some copyist inserted this story out of respect for its circulation within the Christian community. The fact that it does not appear in the earliest (and arguably most reliable) manuscripts leads us to believe such an oral tradition, while possibly true, was probably not part of John's original gospel.

This information may come as a shock to Christians who have never interacted with these concepts - but there's no need for worry. Discrepancies like this are called textual variants and they are well known to biblical scholars and translators. It's important for us all to understand what this means in regard to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

1. We believe that all Scripture is divinely inspired and free from error. (2 Timothy 3:16)

2. We believe that several of the modern English Bibles we have are reliable translations of the original body of Scripture. **This means that we can pick up our Bibles and say, "This is the word of the Lord."** Thankfully, God has preserved His word for us several thousand years after it was written.

3. We understand that the process of transmission from generation to generation has resulted in some variants between different manuscript families. The overwhelming majority of these variations do not affect the final product in any substantial manner. Sometimes the variations are not even translatable (Greek characters that wouldn't appear in English). Sometimes the variations are punctuation or minor spelling differences.

John 7:53-8:11 is a more substantial variant - but it doesn't alter any doctrine of the Bible or any major aspect of our theology. In fact this story is very consistent with what the rest of Scripture says about Jesus.

Some faithful scholars have offered this helpful illustration: Think of purchasing a 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzle and, upon opening it, you discover there are 1,010 pieces in the box. The problem is not that you're missing the original pieces. The problem is that there are a few additional pieces that made their way into the box. Your task would be to figure out which pieces are not original. With careful attention to detail - you could piece together the puzzle and see which pieces don't fit in with the rest.

This is essentially what takes place in manuscript study and Bible translation. The translator's job is to discern which pieces are not part of the original. **Thankfully, there are reliable methods to accomplish this.**

Much more can be said on this subject. If anyone would like to study these things further, we have included several articles at the end of these notes as well as some book recommendations. These don't have to be part of our study...but they are there for anyone who wants to look into these things further.

For tonight's purpose, we're going to include this story in our discussion as an interesting and (possibly) true story from Christ's life all while understanding that it's most likely not genuine Scripture.

John 7:53-8:1-11

In this scene we once again see the malice of the Pharisees as well as the wisdom and grace of our Lord Jesus.

1. This seems like a setup.

How interesting that they were able to catch a woman in the very act! It seems like they knew where to look and when...

It's also obvious that adultery involves TWO people - and yet the Pharisees only bring the woman to Jesus for judgment. It seems the Pharisees were willing to trap a woman in sin and then use her as a pawn in their schemes against Christ. This leads us to the conclusion that this whole episode is more about catching Jesus in a trap and less about honoring the law of God.

Verse 6 confirms this. They were, ***"...testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him."***

So, what was the test? They were trying to put Jesus in a dilemma. On the one hand, the Mosaic law called for the death penalty if someone committed adultery. On the other hand, Jesus preached the forgiveness of sins and the grace of God for sinners. So which would it be? Was the woman to be executed for her sin or not?

They knew Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. They may have expected Him to release the woman, which would make Him appear to contradict the law of Moses and seem soft on sin.

2. Jesus' response is more clever than their trap.

Discussion Question: What do you think Jesus wrote in the sand?

Thoughts: *It's not clear what Jesus wrote on the ground. We can only speculate. Some think He was writing a list of sins that the accusers themselves were guilty of. Whatever it was, it seems to have contributed to the pricking of the Pharisees' consciences.*

Jesus welcomes them to begin stoning her...beginning with whoever was sinless among them. Clearly, this was not meant to condemn her to stoning. Instead, it was aimed at the Pharisees and their hard hearts. None of them were able to follow through with their plot after hearing Jesus speak.

Once they all left, only Jesus and the woman remained. Her accusers could not execute her. Christ did not condemn her. She was left with a clear warning, “**...go and sin no more.**”

Discussion Question: What does Christ's response teach us about the law and grace? Did He violate the law of Moses by not stoning her?

Thoughts: *This is a wonderful picture of justice and mercy at the same time. Jesus clearly identifies her adultery as sin. “...go and **SIN no more.**” And yet, despite her guiltiness in this affair, Jesus forgives her and commands her to live a changed life. These are core gospel truths. We **ARE** sinners and we **DO** deserve condemnation. And yet, because of Christ, there is forgiveness for our sins and the power to live new lives of holiness in which sin is no longer our master.*

The following paragraphs are copy and pasted from gotquestions.org. We think this is a good summary of the relevant issues surrounding the authenticity of these verses.

Does John 7:53–8:11 belong in the Bible?

The story of the woman caught in adultery is found in John 7:53–8:11. This section of Scripture, sometimes referred to as the pericope adulterae, has been the center of much controversy over the years. At issue is its authenticity. Did the apostle John write John 7:53–8:11, or is the story of the adulterous woman forgiven by Jesus a later, uninspired insertion into the text?

The Textus Receptus includes John 7:53–8:11, and the majority of Greek texts do. That is the reason the King James Version of the New Testament (based on the Textus Receptus) includes the section as an original part of the Gospel of John. However, more modern translations, such as the NIV and the ESV, include the section but bracket it as not original. This is because the earliest (and many would say the most reliable) Greek manuscripts do not include the story of the woman taken in adultery.

The Greek manuscripts show fairly clear evidence that John 7:53–8:11 was not originally part of John's Gospel. Among the manuscripts that do contain the section, either wholly or in part, there are variations of placement. Some manuscripts put the pericope adulterae after John 7:36, others after John 21:25, and some even place it in the Gospel of Luke (after Luke 21:38 or 24:53).

There is internal evidence, too, that John 7:53–8:11 is not original to the text. For one thing, the inclusion of these verses breaks the flow of John's narrative. Reading from John 7:52 to John 8:12 (skipping the debated section) makes perfect sense. Also, the vocabulary used in the story of the adulterous woman is different from what is found in the rest of the Gospel of John. For example, John never refers to "the scribes" anywhere in his book—except in John 8:3. There are thirteen other words in this short section that are found nowhere else in John's Gospel.

It certainly seems as if, somewhere along the way, a scribe added this story of Jesus into John's Gospel in a place he thought it would fit well. Most likely, the story had been circulating for a long time—it was an oral tradition—and a scribe (or scribes) felt that, since it was already accepted as truth by consensus, it was appropriate to include it in the text of Scripture. The problem is that truth is not determined by consensus. The only thing we should consider inspired Scripture is what the prophets and apostles wrote as they "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Those who favor the inclusion of the story of the woman taken in adultery point to the sheer number of Greek manuscripts that contain the passage. They explain its omission in early manuscripts as an attempt by overzealous church leaders to prevent misunderstandings. Here is the theory of those who favor inclusion: John wrote the passage just as it appears in the Textus Receptus. But later church leaders deemed the

passage morally dangerous—since Jesus forgives the woman, wives might think they could commit adultery and get away with it. So, the church leaders tampered with the Word of God and removed the passage. To leave the passage in, they reasoned, would be to make Jesus seem “soft” on adultery. Later scribes, following the lead of the Holy Spirit, re-inserted the pericope, which should never have been removed in the first place.

The fact, however, remains that John 7:53—8:11 is not supported by the best manuscript evidence. Thus, there is serious doubt as to whether it should be included in the Bible. Many call for Bible publishers to remove these verses (along with Mark 16:9–20) from the main text and put them in footnotes.

Because we’re talking about certain editions of the Bible being “wrong” in certain ways, we should include a few words on the inerrancy of Scripture. The original autographs are inerrant, but none of the original autographs are extant (in existence). What we have today are thousands of ancient documents and citations that have allowed us to (virtually) re-create the autographs. The occasional phrase, verse, or section may come under scholastic review and debate, but no important doctrine of Scripture is put in doubt due to these uncertainties. That the manuscripts are the subject of ongoing scholarship does not prove there is something wrong with God’s Word; it is a refining fire—one of the very processes God has ordained to keep His Word pure. A belief in inerrancy underpins a reverent, careful investigation of the text.

The following paragraphs are copy and pasted from desiringgod.org.

Neither Do I Condemn You

This message is the kind I may give once every decade or so. The reason it's so rare is that the situation with our text is so rare. In most of your Bibles, you notice that John 7:53–8:11 is either set off in brackets or is in a footnote. The reason for this is that most New Testament scholars do not think it was part of the Gospel of John when it was first written, but was added centuries later. For example,

- Don Carson, who teaches at Trinity, and is in my view one of the best New Testament scholars in the world, writes, “Despite the best efforts . . . to prove that this narrative was originally part of John’s Gospel, the evidence is against [them], and modern English versions are right to rule it off from the rest of the text (NIV) or to relegate it to a footnote (RSV).” (The Gospel According to John, 333)

- Bruce Metzger, one of the world’s great authorities on the text of the New Testament until his death in 2002: “The evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the pericope of the adulteress is overwhelming.” (A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, 219)

- Leon Morris: “The textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the Gospel.” (The Gospel According to John, 882)

- Andreas Köstenberger: “This represents overwhelming evidence that the section is non-Johannine.” (John, 246)

- And Herman Ridderbos: The evidences “point to an unstable tradition that was not originally part of an ecclesiastically accepted text.” (The Gospel of John, 286)

I think they are right. And this gives us a chance to spend a little while on the branch of biblical studies behind these judgments called textual criticism and its implications for the trustworthiness and authority of the Scriptures. So let me summarize the reasons these scholars give for thinking this story of the woman taken in adultery was not originally part of John’s Gospel, and then give some general thoughts about the science of textual criticism that helps make sense of the arguments.

Why This Section Isn’t Original to John’s Gospel

The evidence goes something like this:

1. The story is missing from all the Greek manuscripts of John before the fifth century.
2. All the earliest church fathers omit this passage in commenting on John and pass directly from John 7:52 to John 8:12.
3. In fact, the text flows very nicely from 7:52 to 8:12 if you leave out the story and just read the passage as though the story were not there.

4. No Eastern church father cites the passage before the tenth century when dealing with this Gospel.

5. When the story starts to appear in manuscript copies of the Gospel of John, it shows up in three different places other than here (after John 7:36; 7:44; 21:25), and in one manuscript of Luke, it shows up after 21:38.

6. Its style and vocabulary is more unlike the rest of John's Gospel than any other paragraph in the Gospel.

Now saying all that assumes a lot of facts that many of you simply don't have at your fingertips. And nobody expects you to. This is a hugely technical field of scholarship that at the upper levels requires not only the ability to read ancient languages, but the ability to read them in kinds of ancient handwritten scripts that are very demanding. So let me give you just enough so that you can make sense of these reasons.

The Science of Textual Criticism

The New Testament that we know was originally written in Greek. The first printed Greek New Testament — that came off a printing press — was published by Erasmus in 1516. It turned the world upside down. If you want a great glimpse of this period and the heroism it produced, read David Daniell's biography of William Tyndale.

This means that for 1,500 years the manuscripts of the biblical books were passed down to us through handwritten copies. This is how we have access to the actual words that the New Testament writers wrote with their very hands. None of those first, original manuscripts is known to exist. Which is probably just as well, since we would probably turn it into an idol and charge money for people to come worship.

So the books of the New Testament were preserved for us by faithful, hardworking copyists. Some of these copies were in a script called uncials (referring to manuscripts with all capital Greek letters), others were in a script called minuscule (referring to manuscripts with small Greek letters). A smaller number are called papyri because they are very early and written on the special paper-like material made from the Papyrus plant that was prevalent in the Nile Delta. One last group of manuscripts is the lectionaries — which were collections of texts for reading in public worship.

Simply Staggering

Now here is what's amazing. The abundance of these manuscripts of the New Testament, or parts of the New Testament, as compared to the number of manuscripts for all other ancient works is simply staggering.

- There are ten existing manuscripts of Julius Caesar's Gallic Wars (composed between 58 and 50 BC). And all of these date from the tenth century or later.

- There are twenty manuscripts of Livy's Roman History written roughly during the time when Jesus was alive.
- Only two manuscripts exist for Tacitus's Histories and the Annals, which were composed around AD 100 — one from the ninth and one from the eleventh century.
- There are only eight manuscripts of the History of Thucydides who lived 460–400 BC.

Compare those numbers with the manuscripts and partial manuscripts for the New Testament. These numbers are from the Institute for New Testament Textual Research in Muenster, Germany, which is the most authoritative collection of such data in the world. There are 322 uncial texts, 2,907 minuscule texts, 2,445 lectionary portions, and 127 papyri, for a total of 5,801 manuscripts. These are all hand-written copies of the New Testament or parts of the New Testament preserved in libraries around the world and now captured electronically. No other ancient book comes close to this kind of wealth of diverse preservation.

Problems and Solutions

What that wealth does is create problems and solutions at the same time. These copies do not all agree on what the wording was in the original manuscripts. So the more manuscripts you have, the more variations you find. On the other hand, the more manuscripts you have, the more control you have over which readings are the original ones. The more manuscripts you have the more variations you find, and yet the more they tend to be self-correcting.

For example, if you had only two ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of John and one has the story of the woman taken in adultery and the other doesn't, you would be hard put to choose. But if you have a hundred manuscripts of John, even though you may find more variations, you will be able to tell by the number and age and geographical diversity of the manuscripts whether the story was there or not. This is what the science of textual criticism has done with hundreds of variations in the manuscripts. Here's the way F.F. Bruce put it a generation ago:

If the great number of manuscripts increases the number of scribal errors, it increases proportionately the means of correcting such errors, so that the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is . . . in truth remarkably small. (The New Testament Documents, 19)

No Doctrine Threatened

But what is most significant for the reliability and authority of the New Testament is that the variations that textual critics are unsure of are not the kind that would change any Christian doctrine. For example, in our passage from John 7:53–8:11, no truth that this Gospel teaches is changed by omitting this story. Bruce says, "The variant readings

about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affects no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice” (The New Testament Documents, 20).

Nothing on this score has changed in the last generation since F.F. Bruce wrote in 1943, except, perhaps, that people like Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina, have become very popular in questioning the reliability of our New Testament to give us what the original authors wrote.

A Reason to Worship God

In 2006, Paul D. Wegner reaffirmed F.F. Bruce’s assessment (A Student’s Guide To Textual Criticism of the Bible): “It is important to keep in perspective the fact that only a very small part of the text is in question. . . . Of these, most variants make little difference to the meaning of any passage.”

Then he closes his book by quoting Fredric Kenyon: “It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of the Scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable Word of God” (301).

So when I agree with the vast majority of scholars that the story of the woman taken in adultery was not in the Gospel of John, you should not think: “Oh my, everything is up for grabs now.” Or: “How can I count on any text?” On the contrary, you can be thankful that God has, in his sovereign providence over the transmission process for 2,000 years, ordered things so that the few uncertainties that remain alter no doctrine of the Christian faith. That is really astonishing when you think about it, and we should worship God because of it.