

A Study in the Authenticity of John 7:53 – 8:11

And everyone went to his own house. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. "Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

- NKJV

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Summary of Findings and Conclusion

The textual variant found in John 7:53-8:11 is unique in that it is an entire story from the life of Jesus that is not duplicated elsewhere in the gospel accounts. I have looked at the factual components of the story and have determined that they all could reasonably have occurred given other accounts of the actions of the people involved. I have looked at the doctrine of the passage and have found that the doctrine is consistent with the doctrine found in other passages. The external evidence is quite diverse as to not only the inclusion of the passage, but also the location of the passage within the text. Patristic citations tend to argue in favor of the passage, with Augustine taking a strong lead. As for placement, the passage fits well thematically in John.

What is the Problem?

This textual variant relates to the entire story of the woman who was caught in adultery and brought to Jesus to be judged. There are numerous early manuscripts that retain the passage and numerous early manuscripts that omit it. The story has also appeared to many to not fit in the context of activity that occurs in John's gospel account around chapter 8. This story is not found anywhere else in Scripture, so it represents quite a unique variant for analysis due to its length and character.

In reviewing many writings on this variant, it appears clearly evident that some commentators (e.g., Comfort) have not even discussed the inspiration of the passage, but rather have “dismissed” the passage solely upon how it fits into John's gospel account.¹ Such summary judgments are highly flawed in that they may well lead a reader to conclude that the passage is not inspired and remove a valuable teaching (Deut. 4:2) that was inspired by the Holy Spirit just because they do not like the way it “fits” into the flow of the book. The approach in this study will attempt to avoid any conclusions without evidence.

First, it must be determined whether or not the story is an event that could possibly have occurred. This determination must be made primarily upon internal evidence, which tells about the character of Jesus and the possible motives and actions of those around Him during His ministry. Through this analysis, a conclusion can be drawn as to whether or not this is a viable story of the life of Christ.

If the event could possibly have occurred, then secondly it must be determined whether the telling of the story is an inspired account. The words written will be dissected to determine if the story, as written, is consistent with other inspired accounts of the life of Jesus. This process has been greatly complicated by the fact that this story occurs in no other gospel accounts and therefore limits the corroborating evidence available.

After all of the evidence above has been weighed and if the account is determined to be inspired, then it must thirdly be determined where it fits into the gospel accounts. The context of the passage, the activities of the individuals involved and the vocabulary used will be analyzed in an attempt to determine the proper location for the passage.

¹ Comfort – page 115-116

Is the Story Authentic?

This story of the woman caught in adultery is unique in Scripture. To facilitate our attempt to determine whether or not the story is authentic we will first break the story down into **factual components** that can be compared with similar factual components of known inspired stories to determine whether they could have occurred or not.

We will then review the **doctrine** of the passage to determine whether or not it is consistent with known, inspired doctrine. Through this process, we will also determine whether or not it contradicts known, inspired doctrine. Once all of this evidence has been collected, it can be weighed and a conclusion can be drawn as to the historicity of the account.

Factual Components

The story starts with the statement that the officers, chief priests and Pharisees dispersed to their homes. Certainly no doubt could be raised as to the possibility of such an occurrence happening.

Next, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives was a Sabbath's journey from Jerusalem (Acts 1:12), so it would be an easy journey for a man to make in an evening. We have clear documentation that this is a place that Jesus went on several occasions (Matthew 21:1, 24:3 and 26:30), including His ascension (Acts 1:9-12). In fact, Luke records for us in 22:39, "And He came out and proceeded as was His custom to the Mount of Olives." Thus, it appears quite reasonable that such an occurrence could happen and was quite in character for Jesus.

We then have Jesus coming to the Temple, sitting in the temple and teaching while the people came to Him. This appears to be typical for Him, as Luke records for us in 22:53, "'When I was with you daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me.'" Luke also records in 21:37 that Jesus "...in the daytime He was teaching in the temple." In fact, the only story from Jesus' boyhood years includes details about Him in the Temple teaching, "Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the

teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions.” (Luke 2:46) Matthew² and Mark³ also record similar statements to those of Luke. Thus, it appears that Jesus spent considerable time in the temple teaching and such an occurrence could quite possibly have happened and this was consistent with Jesus’ actions recorded elsewhere.

Next we have the detail of the scribes and Pharisees confronting Jesus to test Him. We have numerous occasions (especially during the final week of Jesus’ ministry) where various Jewish religious leaders confronted Jesus and tried to trap Him (Mark 11:27, 12:13, 12:18, and 12:28). The approach that they took in attempting to create a dilemma whereby one option would get Him in trouble with the Romans and the other would get Him in trouble with their understanding of the Mosaic law is similar to the approach taken in Mark 12:13-17. Thus, it appears quite reasonable that such an occurrence could indeed happen and could even have been part of a planned series of tests that they had formulated for Jesus.

In total, it appears quite reasonable that the facts of this story are not only possible, but are also in keeping with the character of all of the individuals involved. Brown concludes, “the story is quite plausible and quite like some of the other gospel stories of attempts to trap Jesus (Luke 20:20, 27). There is nothing in the story itself or its language that would forbid us to think of it as an early story concerning Jesus.”⁴ Johnson agrees when he states, “the account is so much in harmony with the spirit of Christ, so characteristic, and bears such marks of real history, that I am compelled to believe that it gives a real incident of the life of the Master. . . The deed is the deed of Christ.”⁵ Hobbs states, “it most likely is a true story out of the life of Jesus.”⁶

Doctrine

Historically, the doctrine of this passage has proven to be quite difficult for many people. Metzger states the problem specifically, “Sometimes it is stated that the pericope

² Matthew 21:12, 21:14, 21:23, 26:25

³ Mark 11:11, 11:15, 11:27, 12:35, 13:1, 14:49

⁴ Brown – page 335

⁵ Johnson – page 132-133

⁶ Hobbs – page 149

was deliberately expunged from the Fourth Gospel because it was liable to be understood in a sense too indulgent to adultery.”⁷

Brown gives further reason for such a practice, “The ease with which Jesus forgave the adulteress was hard to reconcile with the stern penitential discipline in vogue in the early Church. It was only when a more liberal penitential practice was firmly established that this story received wide acceptance.”⁸ We know that the conditions of forgiveness do not change for Christians due to the period of time in which they live (Acts 10:34, Acts 15:9, Romans 2:11-12, Ephesians 6:8-9, Colossians 3:25, I Peter 1:17). In actuality there truly was no double standard for this woman, but rather Brown is claiming that some people of the early Church may have perceived the story as such a case and thereby dismissed it entirely.

To understand the doctrine of this passage, we must first understand the trap⁹ that the scribes and Pharisees were trying to set for Him. On the one hand, if Jesus agreed with them that the woman was guilty and was worthy of death, He would be going against the rule of the Roman government – which would be a sin.¹⁰ On the other hand, if He ruled that the woman was innocent, it would incite the crowds of Jerusalem against Him because it would violate the traditional Jewish law that they had been taught by the same scribes and Pharisees.

The error made by those who would believe that Jesus was “too soft” on the sin of adultery is this – they have confused the Mosaic law with the traditional Jewish law that was practiced at the time of Christ.¹¹ The Mosaic law clearly states, “If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then both of them shall die-the man that lay with the woman, and the woman; so you shall put away the evil from Israel.”¹² However, in the account that is recorded here only the woman is brought to Jesus for judgment. This begs the question (which is required by the Mosaic law) – where is the man who was caught? If indeed the woman was caught in the very act of adultery as they claimed¹³, the man must

⁷ Metzger – A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament – page 221

⁸ Brown – page 335

⁹ John 8:6

¹⁰ Romans 13:1-8. It is of interesting note that this passage was written by Paul during the time that Nero (one of the most cruel and wicked of the Roman emperors) ruled in Rome.

¹¹ Jesus teaches against the practice in His words from Mark 7:7, “And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

¹² Deuteronomy 22:22. This is closely paralleled in Leviticus 20:10.

¹³ John 8:4

have been present (obviously) but was not brought for judgment. The motives for such exclusion would be grounds for Jesus to challenge them.

It appears that the accusers were merely using the woman as a pawn with which to trap Jesus and were not concerned about her penitence or spiritual condition. Brown states, “He is dealing here with zealots who have taken upon themselves the indignant enforcement of the Law, and He has every right to demand that their case be thoroughly lawful and their motives be honest... The base motives of the judges, the husband, and the witnesses are not according to the Law, and Jesus has every right to challenge their attempt to secure the woman’s conviction.”¹⁴

At this point, Jesus could well have noted that the equal punishment part of the law had not been followed and “dismissed the case”. However, He did not, but rather challenged the conscience of each accuser through His statement, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”¹⁵ Each accuser, in his own conscience, found himself unworthy to cast a stone and left. Ryle attributes their departure on their acknowledgement of impure motives, as he notes:

But he reminded her accusers that they at any rate were not the persons to bring a charge against her. Their own motives and lives were far from pure. They themselves did not come into the case with clean hands. What they really desired was not to vindicate the purity of God’s law, and punish a sinner, but to wreak their malice on Himself.¹⁶

Halley has a differing viewpoint when he comments, “The language of verse 7 may imply that Jesus knew that the men who were accusing the woman were themselves guilty of the very thing of which they accused her.”¹⁷ Thus, Halley believes that the accusers were themselves guilty of adultery, which had never been punished in accordance with the Mosaic law. It would not require guilt regarding adultery to cause the accusers to leave, but only guilt regarding their lack of following the law in this case. Nevertheless, regardless of the underlying sin that each individual contemplated, the guilt on the part of each accuser led to his departure.

¹⁴ Brown – page 338

¹⁵ John 8:7

¹⁶ Ryle – page 70

¹⁷ Halley – page 541

Jesus' treatment of the woman caught in adultery is also quite consistent with His treatment of two other sinful women. In Luke 7, we have the detailed account of a sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and hair and anointed His feet with costly oil. In this case, Jesus noted her obvious penitence¹⁸ and used her actions to make a strong statement about the sorrow that each should have regarding his own sinful actions.¹⁹ At the end of the story, Jesus tells her that her sins have been forgiven.²⁰ This story shows how Jesus was "exceedingly considerate"²¹ in His treatment of the woman.

In John 4, we have the story of a woman who had five husbands and was currently living with a man in sin. In this case, Jesus rebuked the woman for her sins in private, while no other people were around²². Jesus indeed did not wish to make a public display of this correction, but rather did so in a quiet and gentle manner.

This treatment contrasts greatly with Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees. Probably the greatest example of this treatment can be found in Matthew 23:2-33, where Jesus uses words such phrases as "hypocrite", "fools and blind", "woe to you", "blind guides" and "serpents, brood of vipers" to illuminate the self-righteous attitude that was consistently displayed by these groups. The treatment of the accusing crowd in John 8 is similar in its harshness against their self-righteous attitude.

In this passage, Jesus was not too lenient on the sin of adultery but rather He was consistent with his treatment of other sinful women in the gospel accounts. The treatment of the accusing crowd is consistent with the treatment that similar groups received from Jesus, as well. Therefore, it appears that the doctrinal problems that some people claim for this passage are not problems with this passage, but rather a misunderstanding of the doctrine of this passage, which is consistent with other biblical passages.²³

¹⁸ Luke 7:47

¹⁹ In II Corinthians 7:10, Paul makes a statement about the sorrow that is required for forgiveness when he states, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."

²⁰ Luke 7:48

²¹ Halley – page 541

²² John 4:7-8

²³ For a further discussion of the doctrine of this passage and doctrinal errors noted, reference can be made to pages 409-410 of Piloting the Strait, by Dave Miller – Sain Publications, Pulaski, TN – 1996.

Is this an Inspired Account?

It is necessary at first to discuss the criteria used to determine whether the passage is canonical or not. Some people feel that the original authorship of the passage must be clearly evident in order to conclude as to canonicity. However, using this criterion, the canonicity of the entire book of Hebrews would have to be questioned. As Brown states, “For others, canonicity is a question of traditional ecclesiastical acceptance and usage.”²⁴ Seeing as God purposed to reveal His word to man through this means of manuscripts and copies, I would give more weight to the ecclesiastical acceptance and usage criteria.

In order to determine whether the text written is inspired or not, we will examine mainly the external evidence for the passage. The passage is omitted entirely from several ancient texts, including two papyri (P⁶⁶ and P⁷⁵) and the uncials Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. The passage is included in its current location in the uncial Bezae (along with 15 other uncials), several Old Latin manuscripts (b,c,e,ff²,j), and many others ancient texts. Interestingly, in the manuscripts of family 13 (the Ferrar group) the text is included after Luke 21:38, while family I places it after John 21:24.

The diversity in treatment of this passage is at least perplexing and has led to much speculation and conjecture. In discussing possible sources of the passage, Brown states, “this work is of Syrian origin, and the reference means that the story was known (but not necessarily as Scripture) in 2nd Century Syria.”²⁵ On the opposite side of the issue is Brow, who states, “No writer with an axe to grind could have imagined such a gracious way of dealing with a crowd of bigots. It rings totally true to the life and teaching of the Messiah.”²⁶ Due to the *diversity of manuscripts* that contain the passage in similar form, it indeed appears to have a single origin that was, at very least, close to the time of writing of the original gospel account.

At first glance, *patristic citations* and comments about the passage appear to be mixed in regard to the authenticity of the passage. The following is a list, compiled by Ryle, which categorizes the patristic writers into those who argue for and against the inspiration of this passage:²⁷

²⁴ Brown – page 336

²⁵ Brown – page 335

²⁶ Brow – page 1

²⁷ Ryle – page 73

Include	Exclude
Augustine	Beza
Ambrose	Grotius
Euthymius	Baxter
Rupertus	Hammond
Zwingle	A. Clark
Calvin	Tittman
Melancthon	Tholuck
Echolampadius	Olshausen
Brentius	Hengstenberg
Bucer	Tregelles
Gualter	Alford
Musculus	Wordsworth
Bullinger	Scrivener
Pellican	
Flacius	
Diodati	
Chemnitius	
Aretius	
Piscator	
Calovius	
Cocceius	
Toletus	
Maldonatus	
ALapide	
Ferus	
Nifanius	
Cartwright	
Mayer	
and 10 others	

In discussing the patristic evidences, Metzger comments that “no Greek Church Father for a thousand years after Christ refers to the pericope, including even those who, like Origen, Chrysostom, and Nonnus (in his metrical paraphrase), dealt with the entire Gospel verse by verse.”²⁸ Seeing as this is his only comment on the patristic evidences, he would lead a person to conclude that the patristic evidences are overwhelmingly against the authenticity of the passage. However, Ryle appears to be refuting this particular thought when he notes:

The negative evidence of the Fathers who are against the passage is not nearly so weighty as it appears at first sight. Cyril of Alexandria is one. But

²⁸ Metzger – page 223

his commentary on the eighth chapter of John is lost, and what we have was supplied by the modern hand of Jodocus Clichtovaeus, a Parisian doctor, who lived in the year 1510, A.D. (See Dupin's Eccles. Hist.) – Chrysostom's commentary on John consists of popular public homilies, in which we can easily imagine such a passage as this might possibly be omitted. – Theophylact was notoriously a copier and imitator of Chrysostom. – Origen, the only remaining commentator, is one whose testimony is not of first-rate value, and he has omitted many things in his exposition of St. John. – The silence of Tertullian and Cyprian is perhaps accountable on the same principles by which Augustine explains the omission of the passage in some copies of this Gospel in his own time.²⁹

In his discussion of the passage, Jerome stated that the passage was included in many of the Greek and Latin manuscripts of his day (346-420 A.D.) Augustine gives reasons why the passage is missing from some of the manuscripts of his day (400 A.D.):

This, however, rather shocks the minds of some weak believers, or rather unbelievers and enemies of the Christian faith, insomuch that, afraid of its giving their wives impunity of sinning, they struck out of their copies of the Gospel this that our Lord did in pardoning the woman taken in adultery; as if He granted leave of sinning, when He said, "Go and sin no more."³⁰

The external evidence regarding this passage appears to lead in several diverse directions simultaneously. However, we can be assured of several things:

1. We have very few of the manuscripts dated earlier than 400 A.D.
2. As witnessed by Augustine, there were scribes who struck out the passage during his time because of personal beliefs.
3. It is therefore quite reasonable that the passage was deleted by some scribes, rather than added in similar form by numerous other scribes in diverse geographical locations.

As we have seen before, the doctrine of the passage is consistent with teachings elsewhere in the Bible. The diversity in locating the passage and question as to authorship (discussed in the next section) while intriguing does not provide *prima facie* evidence that the passage is not inspired. It only raises the question as to who was inspired to write it. In

²⁹ Ryle – page 74-75

³⁰ Augustine, as quoted by Ryle on page 76

discussing the beauty of the writing, Brown states, “the delicate balance between the justice of Jesus in not condoning the sin and his mercy in forgiving the sinner is one of the great gospel lessons.”³¹ I am led to agree with Brown that this is truly one of the great gospel lessons and furthermore that the passage is inspired Scripture.

³¹ Brown – page 337

Where does it fit in Scripture?

Once we have determined that the passage is inspired, is the placement after John 7:52 the proper treatment? Most modern English Bible translations place the text in this location, some with a note questioning its validity, while others relegate the passage exclusively to a footnote. For a listing of the treatment in various versions, please refer to the Appendix.

It appears that there are three general solutions to the placement issue. The most popular placement for the text is obviously after John 7:52. The second is the location as it is placed in the Ferrar group of manuscripts – after Luke 21:38. Third is the location after the book of John – a course taken by the family I manuscripts and used by Westcott and Hort.

In discussing where to put the passage based upon the linguistic style of the writing, Brown makes these beautiful comments, “Its succinct expression of the mercy of Jesus is as delicate as anything in Luke; its portrayal of Jesus as the serene judge has all the majesty that we would expect of John.”³²

In examining word usage, the phrase *touto de elegonpeirazontes* (they said this, tempting Him) tends to be Johannine, being used in John 6:6, 7:39, 11:5, 12:6, 12:33 and 21:19.³³ However, it is also used 6 times in the synoptics to refer to the Jewish leaders’ treatment of Jesus. The word *grammateus* (scribes) is used nowhere else in the book of John, but appears 61 times in the synoptics. Thus, it appears that word usage would lean more toward the inclusion of this passage in Luke rather than in John, but not conclusively.

There is a rather detailed argument as to why the passage belongs in Luke. During the last week of Jesus ministry, we find a passage that is thematic for chapter 20, “And He was teaching daily in the temple. But the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people sought to destroy Him, and were unable to do anything; for all the people were very attentive to hear Him.”³⁴ The leaders then question Jesus and try to trap Him on the subjects of John’s baptism (20:1-8), paying taxes (20:20-26), and resurrection and marriage (20:27-39) – all confrontations that are similar to the adulterous woman. Later in Luke 21:38, we read, “and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple”, but

³² Brown – page 336

³³ Clark – page 17

³⁴ Luke 19:47-48

we have no discussion of what was being taught. The story of the adulterous woman is said to be inserted at this point in the text. Luke's next statements relate to the recruiting of Judas as the betrayer, which seems to "follow well" the embarrassment of the scribes and Pharisees at the admission of their own personal guilt.

However, all of the confrontations of Jesus happened in chapter 20, which ends with this statement in verse 40, "And no one dared to ask Him any more questions." Therefore, it appears that the period of questioning has ended with the close of chapter 20. It is after this statement and the discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs of the end of the age that we come to the point where the story of the adulterous woman would be added. If Luke 20:40 is taken at face value, then ***the story could not be placed in this context***

We can review some of the evidence for the placement of the text within the book of John. Metzger takes an approach that the story is not native to John but belongs where it is when he states, "Most copyists apparently thought that it would interrupt John's narrative least if it were inserted after 7:52."³⁵ While this statement is interesting, it is hardly provable. Clark makes an equally unprovable suggestion:

...perchance the Apostle John himself wrote a second edition of his Gospel, adding the paragraph. I can point to a book on Ethics, whose second edition differs from the first by only the addition of an extra chapter halfway through. Could not John have done similarly?³⁶

From a more provable perspective, Brown writes, "while the story may be textually out of place, from a theological viewpoint it fits into the theme of judgment in ch. viii."³⁷ He supports this claim with the fact that Jesus speaks of the admission of evidence in John 7:51 and the Pharisees speak of it in John 8:13. Given the thematic flow of the book of John, this observation is quite compelling. I would have to agree.

³⁵ Metzger – page 221

³⁶ Clark – page 17

³⁷ Brown – page 336

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Appendix - Treatment by different Bible Versions

Bible in Basic English – Includes the text after John 7:52, but brackets it

Canterbury Version – Includes the text after John 7:52, but brackets it

King James Version – Includes the text after John 7:52 with no notes

New American Standard Version – Includes the text after John 7:52, but brackets it and includes the footnote that reads, “John 7:53-8:11 is not found in most of the old mss.”

New International Version – Includes the text after John 7:52, but includes a comment in the text which reads, “The earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11.”

New King James Version – Includes the text with a footnote that reads, “The words *And everyone* through *sin no more* (8:11) are bracketed by NU-Text as not original. They are present in over 900 manuscripts.”

Revised Standard Version – Includes the text only in a footnote

Twentieth Century New Testament – omits the passage

Wescott and Hort – Includes the text at the end of the book of John

Weymouth's New Testament – Includes the text after John 7:52, but brackets it

