

Was John 7:53-8:11 in the Original Text of John?

I. Introduction

The story of the woman caught in adultery is one of the most beloved stories in the gospels. This story highlights the incredible mercy, wisdom, and courage of our Savior as He exhorts the crowd to forgive this woman who was caught in adultery. Many believers have been encouraged through this story in the forgiveness they have received in the gospel. However, for those who have studied this text at a deeper level, they are aware of the controversy surrounding it. ***The vast majority of New Testament scholars believe that this story was not in the original text of the Gospel of John.*** This raises several important questions for the church. Is this story a part of the Word of God? Should we study and preach it? How do we determine whether it is or not? This essay will seek to answer these questions.

To state my thesis up front, I (Pastor Nate) am of the opinion that this story *probably* was not originally in John's gospel, but it likely was an oral tradition that was passed down through the centuries and eventually made its way into our Bibles. I feel a bit like the jerk who tells a kid that Santa Claus isn't real by telling Christians that a beloved story was likely not original, but this is where a study of the evidence has taken me. To demonstrate this thesis, I want to begin by explaining *how* I came to that conclusion by explaining what textual criticism is. I then want to examine the evidence for this story in John 8. I will then conclude by giving some practical application.

II. Textual Criticism

It would be easy to answer this question if we had the original copy of John's gospel that he wrote, but we no longer do. In fact, there are no known surviving *autographs* of Scripture, that is, original documents written by the author. What we have are *copies* of the originals that are called *manuscripts*. The way that we determine whether a text was in the original work is through comparing copies to find the original reading. Scholars call this discipline "textual criticism." Textual criticism is "the practice of comparing the various copies of a work in order to determine, as best as possible, the exact wording of an original text that is either undiscovered or no longer exists."¹ Through textual criticism, we compare manuscripts to other manuscripts to determine which was more likely to be the original reading. When there is a difference between manuscripts, we call this a *textual variant*. When considering textual variants, scholars use both *internal* and *external* evidence to determine which variant is most likely to be correct. *Internal* evidence refers to content within the text that infers which reading is most likely to be original, and *external* evidence refers to evidence from comparing one manuscript to others.

At this point, Christians sometimes get nervous. If we don't have the original autographs of Scripture, and the manuscripts contain differences, how can we be sure that the Bible is reliable? Far from making the Bible less reliable, when the discipline of textual criticism is carried out in the

¹ Craig Blomberg. *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). 2.

context of other ancient literature, it should actually *increase* our confidence in the Bible. Some skeptics have criticized the Bible by saying that we can't understand it because we don't have access to the original autographs. The only problem with that argument is that *there is not a single work of history from the Greco-Roman Period where we have the original autograph!* If that's the standard of historical reliability, we are forced to admit that we don't know *anything* about ancient history. So the question is *not* whether we have the autographs; the question is the reliability of the manuscripts. Let me give you several reasons why the understanding of manuscript evidence should *strengthen* our confidence in Scripture.

1. When comparing the Bible to other ancient documents, it becomes obvious that *the Bible is the best attested book in ancient history*, and it's not even close. Scholars generally recognize that a work is more reliable when there are more manuscripts, and those manuscripts are earlier. Consider some of the most influential historians and works of history from the same time period as the New Testament. We have about 10 copies of Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, 27 copies from Livy, 3 copies from Tacitus, 200 for Suetonius, 75 for Herodotus, and 20 for Thucydides. In contrast to this, to date, we have discovered over 5,700 hand-copied manuscripts of the Greek New Testament.² If one were to include translations into other languages, that number would go over 20,000. Needless to say, when we compare what we have in terms in manuscripts with other ancient literature, it's not even close. The New Testament wins in a landslide!
2. But that's not all. Not only do we have *way more* copies of the New Testament than any other ancient document by a mile; the copies that we have are *much older*. A general principle of textual criticism is that the closer a manuscript is to its time of writing, the more reliable it is considered to be. Of the historians I mentioned earlier, here are the dates of their earliest copies.

Ancient Work Time from composition to earliest manuscript

Cesar's <i>Gallic Wars</i>	900 years
Livy	400 years
Tacitus	700 years
Suetonius	600 years
Herodotus	400 years
Thucydides	400 years

In contrast to this, *the earliest New Testament document we have is within 40 years of composition*. P⁵², a papyrus fragment from John 18, dates to the early second century, and John was written around 90 A.D. More than 30 more papyri are dated to within a century of the time of writing.³ Hundreds of manuscripts appears within a few centuries of time of composition in the first century. Therefore, when one compares the New Testament manuscripts to *any other ancient document* from the same time period, it is obvious that the New Testament is more historically reliable than anything we have. *If one were to discredit the historical reliability of the New*

² Ibid., 7.

³ Ibid.

Testament, in order to be consistent, one would be forced to admit that we don't know anything about ancient history.

3. Finally, the *consistency* of the New Testament across the manuscripts is remarkable. While there are many textual variants between the manuscripts, the *vast majority* of differences are minor, inconsequential, and have no bearing on the church's doctrine. Blomberg wrote that "less than one percent" of textual variants deserve our attention.⁴ There are, in fact, only 2 lengthy passages in the New Testament that are disputed by scholars: Mark 16:9-20, and John 7:53-8:11, the subject of this essay.

At the outset of this discussion, we need to be reminded that *the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, authoritative Word of God*. Nothing about the practice of textual criticism threatens or changes that fact. The purpose of textual criticism is to determine, as best we can, what the inspired words that God wrote to His people were. Far from undermining our confidence in the Bible, when we compare it with other ancient documents, we should be amazed at how thoroughly God has preserved His Word for us. Even when we're faced with a difficult question like John 7:53-8:11, we should be grateful to God for preserving His Word and trust that He will lead us into the truth.

III. The Evidence on John 7:53-8:11

External Evidence

We will now apply the principles of textual criticism that we gave earlier to the story of the woman caught in adultery. It is my opinion (Pastor Nate) that the external evidence weighs heavily in the direction of the story *not* being an original part of the Gospel of John. Before I state my reasons, let's begin by asking what the evidence is to *include* the story. The primary reason is that the majority of New Testament manuscripts that we have *do* contain the story. This story carries the weight of over 1,000 years of use in the church, and this should not be overturned lightly.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons why I (along with most NT scholars) have come to this conclusion.

- Even though the *majority* of New Testament manuscripts have the story, the *earliest* ones do not. In fact, **every copy of John from the first several hundred years of church history does not contain this story**. The earliest manuscript that contains the story is from the 5th century. Bruce Metzger, a leading textual critic, wrote, "The evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the pericope of the adulteress is overwhelming. It is absent from such early and diverse manuscripts as $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$, $\aleph$ B L N T W X Y Δ Θ Ψ 0141 0211 22 33 124 157 209 788 828 1230 1241 1242 1253 2193 *al.*"⁵ The fact that we have dozens of early copies and John and none of them have the story is very telling. Given that this story was absent for the first 300 years of church history, is it more likely that the earliest copies all *just happen* to be missing

⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ Bruce Manning Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)* (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 187.

the same story that should have been there, or that this story was not original but was added later than then recopied from that point on? I believe the latter.

- None of the Greek early church fathers, who wrote extensive commentaries on virtually the whole New Testament, quote this story, or even acknowledge its existence. According to Timothy Miller, “None of the Greek fathers (e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, etc.) mention the passage for the first millennium of the church’s existence.”⁶ D.A. Carson concurs, noting that when the early church fathers wrote commentaries on John, they skipped right from John 7:52 to John 8:12.⁷ The early church fathers seemed to be unaware of the story.
- The story has a wide variety of placement once it did begin to be circulated. It is sometimes found as it is in our Bibles, after John 7:52. Sometimes it is after John 7:36, John 7:35, John 21:25, or even in the Gospel of Luke, after Luke 21:38.⁸ The diversity of placement suggests an oral tradition that was in the process of being added.
- Finally, even when the story began to be circulated, the early copies that we have with the story are marked. Metzger wrote, “Significantly enough, in many of the witnesses that contain the passage it is marked with asterisks or obeli, indicating that, though the scribes included the account, they were aware that it lacked satisfactory credentials.”⁹ This suggests that even the earliest scribes were unsure of its authenticity.

Internal Evidence

The major reason why this conversation is difficult for Christians is that this is not just any story; this is a *beloved* story. This story is a favorite for many Christians, and rightfully so. It simply *sounds like* Jesus. The Holy Spirit has worked through this story countless times to work in the hearts of people. Without discounting that truth, I would argue that not only does the *external* evidence point to the story not being originally a part of John; the internal evidence does as well. Here are a few reasons why.

- Craig Keener writes about the use of non-Johannine vocabulary.¹⁰ A full one-sixth of the words used in this story do not occur anywhere else in John. The vocabulary is much more consistent with one of the synoptic gospels.¹¹ For example, the “scribes” are mentioned very frequently in the synoptic gospels, over 50 times. The only time that the “scribes” are mentioned in the entire Gospel of John is in this story in John 8:3.

⁶ Timothy E. Miller, “Text-Criticism and the Pulpit: Should One Preach About the Woman Caught in Adultery?” *Themelios*, 45:2, (August 2020).

⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). 333.

⁸ Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 189.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, Volume One*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003). 735.

¹¹ I read through John in Greek in Summer 2025, and the shift in language, grammar, and writing style from this story to the passages before and after is stark. John has a very distinctive style of writing, and when read in the original language, it very much reads like another author.

- This story interrupts the flow of thought in John's narrative. If one were to read from John 7:52 directly into John 8:12, it makes much more sense. John 8:12 begins by saying, "Again Jesus spoke to *them*." Who are the "them" that Jesus is referring to? According to John 8:13, it is the Pharisees. If the story of the woman caught in adultery is original to John's gospel, this is a problem, because that story ends with the scribes and Pharisees leaving except Jesus and the woman (John 8:9-11). But if that story is removed and this is read right after John 7:52, this makes perfect sense, because John 7:40-52 records a conversation among the Pharisees. So, when Jesus spoke to "them" (John 8:12), it was the "them" that were just talking about him in John 7:40-52.

Conclusion

For these reasons, the evidence seems to weigh heavily in the direction of this story not being original to John's gospel. I would therefore conclude that this story *probably* wasn't in John's gospel. That doesn't mean, however, that this story is *inauthentic*. Even scholars that do not think it was originally part of John believe that it was an authentic story from the life of Jesus that was so treasured by the early church that it was eventually added to the canon. My 2 favorite commentators of John, Craig Keener and D.A. Carson, argue for this. Likewise, Metzger wrote, "It is obviously a piece of oral tradition which circulated in certain parts of the Western church and which was subsequently incorporated into various manuscripts at various places."¹² This is my opinion as well. I think this story probably really happened, but it probably wasn't written by John. Popular apologist Wes Huff agrees, writing that "Despite it almost certainly not being original to the Gospel of John, that does not disqualify it from being a historically authentic Jesus story."¹³

I would not go as far as R.C. Sproul, who wrote, "whether it belongs here in John's Gospel, in Luke's Gospel (where some ancient manuscripts place it), or somewhere else is a question I leave for the ages. But I believe it is nothing less than the very Word of God."¹⁴ I believe that this story is *likely* an authentic oral tradition about an episode in the life of Jesus that was so memorable that it was passed through generations and eventually made its way into copies of John. Just because this story doesn't belong here in John doesn't mean it didn't happen; I think it's likely that it did. I think it's going too far to authoritatively declare this story to be on the same level as other Scripture in the absence of evidence, but it's also wrong to outright dismiss it.

IV. How Should We Think About John 7:53-8:11?

Given this conclusion, how should Christians regard this story? Let me give a few points of practical application.

- ***Don't let this undermine your faith in Scripture.*** "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that

¹² Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 188.

¹³ Wesley Huff, "The Most Famous Bible Verse Not Original to the Bible," *Wesley Huff* (blog), July 24, 2023, <https://www.wesleyhuff.com/blog/2023/7/24/the-most-famous-bible-verse-not-original-to-the-bible>.

¹⁴ R.C. Sproul. *John: St. Andrew's Expository Commentary*. (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009). 149.

the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2nd Timothy 3:16-17). The Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. Textual criticism should not undermine our confidence in that fact, but when we consider it in the context of ancient literature, it should only strengthen it. There are only two significant textual variants in the entire New Testament, one of which we have studied in this essay. Neither of these variants should give us any reason to doubt our Bibles.

- ***Don’t be dogmatic in either direction.*** This is not a first-tier issue. No major doctrine of the Christian faith stands or falls based on this story. Bible-believing Christians can hold different views on the canonicity of John 7:53-8:11 and remain unified in the local church. This is not a “liberal vs. conservative” issue, as Bible-believing Christians throughout the centuries have held a variety of perspectives on this. This is not an issue that we should divide over.
- ***Use it as an illustration.*** When preaching on this story, John Piper argued that this text was likely not an original part of John, but still seemed likely to be an authentic account. When asking whether this story really happened, Piper said, “Perhaps. I would like to think so. Who doesn’t love this story? But that does not give it the authority of Scripture. So what I will do is take its most remarkable point and show that it is true on the basis of other parts of Scripture, and so let this story not be the basis of our authority, but an echo and a pointer to our authority, namely, the Scriptures, that teach what it says.”¹⁵ This story *illustrates* the beauty of forgiveness, the dangers of hypocrisy, and the life-change that issues from an encounter with Jesus. It should be used accordingly.

Whether this story is original or not, may we all celebrate the forgiveness that is available in Jesus. Like that woman, we all deserved death, but have been forgiven freely through the gospel. Like her, let us “go and sin no more.” And let us be mature in our thinking as Bible students, able to analyze what has been passed down to us through the centuries to better understand Scripture. But let us hold our positions with humility, loving those with whom we disagree. May God be glorified as we do these things.

¹⁵ John Piper, “Neither Do I Condemn You,” *Desiring God*, 6 March 2011, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/neither-do-i-condemn-you-3>.

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