

A Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11)

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (11/14/2021)

Introduction

1. The passage before us was originally not part of the Gospel of John but generally regarded as having been added sometime in the Middle Ages. Some think the story was added to illustrate John 7:24 or John 8:16, perhaps both. But the inclusion presents some problems, the greatest of which has to do with the verity of the Bible: Can it be trusted? Or must we be guaranteed that the Bible we hold is a perfect copy of the original text in order to trust it?
2. The Bible itself gives clear testimony to its origin and its being worthy of trust. God has preserved His Word in our present translations. Let the Scriptures speak for themselves (2 Samuel 7:28; Titus 1:2, 3; Hebrews 6:17–20). The words of Scripture are completely true and without error in any part (Numbers 23:19; Psalm 12:6; Psalm 119:89, 90; Proverbs 30:5; Matthew 24:35).

This assurance, however, does not mean that there are no errors in the copies. Neither does it mean that the existence of errors automatically negates their value. Our confidence rests in the *God* who preserves His Word and keeps it pure in all ages (Hebrews 4:12; 1 Peter 1:23, 25; 2 Peter 1:20, 21; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

I. The Story and the Problem of Support

1. Virtually no early manuscripts support the passage. With the exception of the western uncial “D,” no early manuscripts have John 7:53–8:11. No early translations (Coptic, Syriac, Old Latin, Georgian, or Armenian) contain the text. No early church fathers make any reference to the passage in their writings or sermons before the 10th century. Later manuscripts that include the passage mark it as suspect. Some manuscripts include it, but some place it after Luke 21:38; others place it after John 7:36 or 7:44; still others, after 21:25.
2. Internal evidence also raises questions as to the vocabulary and structure, which are foreign to John. Here are three examples: The word “*morning*” (8:2) is *orthros*, which is often used by Luke but not John, who preferred to use *proia* (18:28); The word “*people*” is *laos* (8:2), used typically of Luke, but John used *ochlos*, “*crowd*” (7:41). The phrase “*scribes and Pharisees*” in John 8:3 is never used by John but is common in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 12:38; 23:13; Luke 5:21; 6:7; 11:53). John preferred “*the Jews*” or “*the Pharisees*.”
3. The story does not fit the *location* in John because it disrupts the continuity of John’s primary purpose to show that Jesus was the Messiah who fulfilled the two ritual customs practiced on the added eighth-day Sabbath that followed the Feast of Booths. Remove John 7:53–8:11 and the continuity of the text is clearly maintained. The story better fits the Passion week, six months future. Jesus stayed on Mount Olivet at that time. He would arrive at the temple early each morning to teach. At that time, there were many attempts of His enemies to entrap Him, as they do in the story inserted here.
4. However, the story presented in the text is, no doubt, authentic. Nothing in the text casts any question on Christ, His treatment of those who brought the woman to Him, or of His compassionate treatment of the guilty woman. This event probably took place, but the question of *when* remains uncertain. Also, as noted earlier, the text of the story fits the style of Luke, who probably recorded it.

II. The Story and Jesus

1. The Pharisees, to trick Jesus into condemning Himself, brought a woman taken in adultery to Him. They argued, “*Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?*”. The unanswered question is, *How* was she taken in “*the very act*” (v. 4)? There are two implications: These vile men set the woman up to see what Jesus would do, and they were not really interested in justice or dealing with sin (Deuteronomy 22:22).
2. As with every effort to catch Him, Jesus skillfully evaded their trap, turned it back on them, and revealed their hypocrisy.
 - a. Why did Jesus write on the ground? The text does not say, but as He wrote, the Pharisees kept pressing Him to tell them what He would do. If He said to stone her, He would be seen as acting out of His authority. If He forbade it, He would be seen as ignoring the law and relaxing public morals. Jesus replied, “*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her*” (v. 7; Deuteronomy 17:7). Then He continued to write on the ground. As He did so, the woman’s accusers quietly left, one by one.
 - b. Some have suggested that Jesus wrote the Ten Commandments. I would argue for something better. He wrote Jeremiah 17:13.
3. Did Jesus ignore the law by letting the guilty woman go? When the Pharisees left, she had no accuser and could not be condemned without witnesses. That was the law and the question Jesus asked, “*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*” (v. 10). She confessed, “*No one, Lord.*” Jesus replied, “*Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.*” Did Jesus become her Savior and Lord? I do believe so. Has He saved you?

Application

1. If the account here inserted does not actually belong here, can we doubt its authenticity? There is nothing in the account that can be disputed as unworthy of Scripture. It honors the Savior, holds the purity of God’s standards and holiness. It exalts the saving mercy of the Savior, showing His grace and tenderness to humbled sinners while, at the same time, His stern and unrelenting stand against the hypocrisy of the Jews of His day. How would He treat you if you were suddenly in His presence? That may be a reality sooner than you can imagine.
2. The Bible is a unique book. If there are some minor issues with variants, we can still hold the Bible as both inspired and preserved for the purpose for which God gave it to us. One may have more confidence that John wrote his Gospel than that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. The Bible does its work in us when and only when we get into it (2 Corinthians 3:16–18). Read it (1 Timothy 4:13), memorize it (Psalm 119:11), meditate on it (Psalm 1:2), study it (2 Timothy 2:15), obey it (Psalm 119:5), and live it (Psalm 19:7–14).