

Ancient New Testament Manuscripts

John 7:53-8:11

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1. Review of textual criticism

Since the original writings of the New Testament have not survived the two thousand year span of time, the task of determining their text becomes necessary. All of these ancient handwritten copies have discrepancies between them. This process of evaluating the variant readings of existing 5,800+ New Testament manuscripts and coming to a decision about the original text is known as textual criticism.

The work of textual criticism surrounds the study of which manuscripts support which variant reading, known as the “external evidence.” The counterpart to this study is to consider which variant reading would have been more likely to give rise to the other reading(s), known as the “internal evidence.” The best and most widely used approach to dealing with these variants in the manuscripts is called “reasoned eclecticism” which treats internal and external evidence as equally valuable, looking at the external evidence first before considering the internal evidence.

Today’s class will begin to look specifically at the most significant textual variants according to our English translations. We will begin with one of the most well-known and extensive textual variants that exists in our modern English translations, John 7:53-8:11.

2. Overview of John 7:53-8:11

John 7:53-8:11 is the story of the woman caught in adultery. In theological circles, this passage is known as the “Periscope Adulterae.” This text will be referred to as simply the “Periscope” for the sake of ease of communication.

Most English Bible Translations will give some statement (at a minimum) regarding its questionable authenticity. The New American Standard Bible puts the passage in brackets with a footnote reading “John 7:53-8:11 is not found in most of the old mss.” The updated NASB (1995) phrased it differently: “Later mss add the story of the adulterous woman.” Both the English Standard Version and the New International Version inform the reader prior to the passage: “THE EARLIEST MANUSCRIPTS DO NOT INCLUDE 7:53-8:11.” The ESV goes one step further by placing this variant text within double brackets. The King James Version and the New King James Version place the text in John without any distinguishing marks. However, the NKJV includes a footnote saying “The words *And everyone* through *sin no more* (8:11) are bracketed by NU-Text as not original.”

In this class we will look closely at which manuscripts are being spoken of and how to evaluate John 7:53-8:11 in light of the evidence. It is important to note that the goal of textual criticism is to evaluate the reading of the original text. This is a separate issue from whether this text is historically accurate since it is possible for an account to be historically accurate without being scriptural.

3. The External Evidence

a. Papyri

There are only two known papyri which contain enough of John to evaluate whether John 7:53-8:11 was in the original text. Both P66 (c. 150-200) and P75 (c. 200), both of the Alexandrian text-type, omit the Periscope. One other papyri, P39 (c. 200s), has the text of John 8:14-22 but there has been spacing analysis which has led to the conclusion that there is insufficient room for this papyri to contain the account of the woman caught in adultery.

b. Uncials

The oldest uncial manuscripts omit John 7:53-8:11:

- Codex Vaticanus (c. 325) – Alexandrian text-type
- Codex Sinaiticus (c. 330-360) – Alexandrian text-type
- Codex Borgianus (c. 400s) – Alexandrian text-type
- Codex Washingtonianus (c. 400) – eclectic text-type
- Codex Petropolitanus Purpureus (c. 500s) – Byzantine text-type
- Uncial 0211 (c. 600s) – Byzantine text-type
- Codex Regius (c. 700s) – Alexandrian text-type
- Codex Koridethi (c. 800s) – Byzantine text-type
- Codex Macedoniensis (c. 800s) – Byzantine text-type
- Codex Sangallensis (c. 800s) – Byzantine text-type (a blank space was left)
- Codex Athous Lavrensis (c. 800) – Byzantine text-type
- Codex Monacensis (c. 900) – Byzantine text-type
- Uncial 0141 – A verse-by-verse commentary on John from the 900s.

In addition to this, two of the oldest uncials – Codex Alexandrinus (c. 400) and Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (c. 450)—no longer have the pages that would have contained John chapters 7-8. However, based upon calculations regarding how much space the Periscope would have taken, it becomes clear that neither of these texts could have contained John 7:53-8:11. There simply is not enough space available.

The most important uncial that includes John 7:53-8:11 is Codex Bezae (c. 400). It is the one Western text diglot that contains the Gospels and is unusual in its high number of additions it makes, mostly in conforming to the Latin version. The next oldest uncial that contains the Periscope is Codex Basilensis (c. 700s) which includes only 8:2-11 and marks it with an asterisk.

Several uncial manuscripts from the ninth century include John 7:53-8:11: Codex Boreelianus; Codex Seidelianus I; Codex Seidelianus II; Codex Cyprius; Codex Campianus; Codex Nanianus; Codex Tischendorfianus. In the only dated uncial, Codex Vaticanus 354 from 949 AD, John 7:53-8:11 is marked with an asterisk.

The testimony of the manuscripts from the first seven centuries of the church speak very strongly, almost unanimously, to John 7:53-8:11 not being considered part of the Gospel record. It is not until you get to the eighth century that the manuscript evidence begins to change.

c. Minuscules

Unlike uncials, minuscule manuscripts include upper and lower case letters. These New Testament minuscule text appear beginning in the tenth century. Most minuscules that contain John include John 7:53-8:11. The NKJV estimates the number of manuscripts that include John 7:53-8:11 to be over 900.

However, many minuscules omit John 7:53-8:11. These include the following minuscules: 3, 12, 15, 21, 22, 32, 33, 36, 39, 44, 49, 63, 72, 87, 96, 97, 106, 108, 124, 131, 134, 139, 151, 157, 169, 209, 213, 228, 297, 388, 391, 401, 416, 445, 488, 496, 499, 501, 523, 537, 542, 554, 565, 584, 703, 719, 723, 730, 731, 736, 741, 742, 768, 770, 772, 773, 776, 777, 780, 788, 799, 800, 817, 827, 828, 843, 896, 989, 1077, 1080, 1100, 1178, 1230, 1241, 1242, 1253, 1333, 2193 and 2768.

Additionally minuscules 105, 284, 431, 461 470, 578, 1424 and 2174 include John 7:53-8:11 by the hand of a later corrector.

Also, several dozen minuscules that include John 7:53-8:11 do so with an asterisk:
4, 8, 14, 18, 24, 35, 83, 95 (?), 109, 125, 141, 148, 156, 161, 164, 165, 166, 167, 178, 179, 200, 202, 285, 338, 348, 363, 367, 376, 386, 407, 443, 478, 479, 510, 532, 547, 553, 645, 655, 656, 661, 662, 685, 757, 758, 763, 769, 781, 797, 801, 824, 825, 829, 844, 845, 867, 873, 897, 922, 1073, 1092 (later hand), 1187, 1189, 1443 and 1445.

A remarkable number of minuscules that include John 7:53-8:11 put the passage in a different part of the text than the common location. This placement includes:

- 1) Placement after Luke 21:38 – Family 13 (13, 69, 124, 346, 543, 788, 826, 828 and 983).
- 2) Placement after Luke 24:53 – 1333 (includes only 8:3-11).
- 3) Placement after John 7:36: – 225.
- 4) Placement at the end of the Gospels – 255.
- 5) Placement after John 21:25 – Family 1 (1, 118, 131, 205, 209) along with 20, 37, 129, 135, 207, 259, 301, 347, 470, 564, 831, 1076, 1078, and 1356.

A few minuscules include only part of 7:53-8:11, such as 759, which contains only 7:53-8:2 and 707 which has only 8:3-11 (with asterisks).

Without even considering the age of the manuscripts, of the 1,763 continuous text manuscripts with John 7-8, 268 of them completely omit the Periscope and a large number of others include it in a different location, with an asterisk, or partially.

d. Lectionaries

The majority of lectionaries omit John 7:53-8:11. In addition, about forty other lectionaries include only 8:3-11, with a few more including 8:2 or 8:1. Several others include it with asterisks.

Lectionaries are not complete text of Bible books so the omission of this passage may not be significant in every lectionary. These were New Testament text compiled for the purpose of the church service, which may explain some of the omissions.

e. Versions

The majority of early translations omit John 7:53-8:11 (most Syriac, Coptic, and Gothic; some Armenian, Ethiopian and Georgian). Nearly all of the Armenian versions that have the Periscope place it after John 21:25.

Most Old Latin translations include the story of the woman caught in adultery but several do not, including the oldest Latin text. It is the Latin translation that has driven the story of the woman caught in adultery since the western church used the Latin text at its New Testament for over one thousand years.

f. Church fathers

The earliest church father that references the account of the woman caught in adultery in any way was Didymus the Blind (d. 398). Very few others reference this text at all and all in the western church (cf. Codex Bezae). These references are short of evidence of the text of John 7:53-8:11 but they do testify to an awareness of the story of the women in the west. In the east, there was no Greek church father who commented on the Periscope until Euthymius Zigabenus in the twelfth century and he noted that the accurate copies did not contain the account.

Origen's (c. 230) commentary on the surrounding verses omits any comment regarding the Periscope. Chrysostom (c. 400), Cyril of Alexandria (c. 440) and Nonnus (c. 400) likewise pass over any mention of the Periscope in their comments on John's Gospel. In addition, Tatian's Diatessaron, a harmony of the Gospels written around 150-160 A.D. omits John 7:53-8:11.

The earliest *secondary* reference is made by a tenth century historian, Agapius of Heirapolis, who referenced Papias, a second century church father, as speaking of the story of the woman caught in adultery. At best, this indicates an awareness of the story, not necessarily where the knowledge of this story originated.

4. The Internal Evidence

It appears that a person's evaluation of the internal evidence is directly related to their response to the external evidence. If the external evidence is unconvincing, then this passage will be viewed as fitting the surrounding context.

Objectively, there are a relatively high percentage of unique words found in John 7:53-8:11. Fourteen words in this section are found nowhere else in John's Gospel. Indeed, some textual analysts view the Greek text to be much closer to the writing style of Luke than of John. However, this does not necessarily lead to a conclusion of its lack of authenticity since John may have chosen certain unique words. The significance of this vocabulary and style is the in the eye of the observer.

The primary internal analysis that would lead us to a conclusion is how remarkably difficult it would be to expect a scribe (actually countless number of scribes) to leave out this story from their copy. This could not possibly be accidental and would require a grand conspiracy of such epic proportions that would have been truly impossible given communication capabilities of the first millennium.

5. Reasons to reject John 7:53-8:11 as original

The external evidence against considering John 7:53-8:11 to be original is overwhelming. It is absent in every significant Alexandrian manuscript witness. It is not present in the early Byzantine texts, including Codex Alexandrinus (c. 400-440) and Codex Petropolitanus Purpureus (c. 500). The earliest appearance is in Codex Bezae, a unique western text that habitually includes additional material more than any other known Greek manuscript.

The absence of this passage in so many ancient translations outside of the Latin and the floating nature of the text only supports its omission. The external evidence alone is sufficient to prove that this is not part of the Gospel of John. Add to this the tendency of the scribes to include extra material and there can be no doubt regarding the nature of John 7:53-8:11.

6. Arguments made to defend John 7:53-8:11

There are many who have a complete aversion to considering John 7:53-8:11 to be a later addition. The arguments they advance include:

a) The argument from historicity

Many who believe that John 7:53-8:11 was in the original text will testify to its historicity. There is no debate regarding its historical value as Bruce Metzger notes, "At the same time the account has all the earmarks of historical veracity. 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."

Yet these comments get taken to mean more than this text is very old but that it is historically accurate. If it is historically genuine then the burden falls on the person who believes it is not original to explain why a true story of Jesus should be excluded from the Scripture.

b) The "dot and space" theory

There are dots that exist in early uncial manuscripts as a rudimentary form of punctuation. Some in defense of the Periscope have claimed that these dots are actual markers of textual variants, thus demonstrating the knowledge of the scribe of the Periscope. This type of interpretation of these dots are solely guided by an attempt to explain the omission of the Periscope, not based on any complete analysis of the use of the dots in either the papyri or the early uncials.

For example, P66 (c. 150-200) has 248 of these dots in the Gospel of John. Are we to presume that the author of such an early manuscript knew of that many textual omissions? It is far better to understand these marks as dividers that are analogous to paragraph dividers and punctuation marks.

c) The argument from later church fathers

Beginning at the time of Codex Bezae we start to see church fathers in the western church referencing the story of the woman caught in adultery (Anselm, Augustine). Defenders of John 7:53-8:11 give these writers equal or greater weight than earlier writers, much like later manuscripts are given equal or greater weight than earlier ones.

d) The “conspiracy against adulterers” theory

This theory is that the church did not want adulterers forgiven or else women might be more likely stray so therefore they deliberately left out this passage. Augustine (c. 400) considered the possibility of the story of the adultery belonging to the original text based on this reason when he wrote, “...enemies of the true faith, fearing, I suppose, lest their wives should be given impunity in sinning, removed from their manuscripts the Lord’s act of forgiveness toward the adulteress, as if He who had said ‘sin no more’ had granted permission to sin.”

Augustine was a leader in the Western church when we find the Periscope first appearing in Greek texts so he would be aware of this variant and more likely favorable toward it. It is preposterous to consider the omission was based on this reason due since a vast conspiracy would be required to omit it from so many Greek texts and other translations.

e) The “manuscript is not complete” theory

Some of the manuscripts that have John 7-8 but do not have the Periscope Adulterae have damage. When there is a lack of completeness of a manuscript, particularly at the end of John, the possibility is raised that the Periscope may have been included at a place in the text that we no longer have, thus eliminating said manuscript from consideration as external evidence as “inconclusive.” This of course would assume the floating text problem of John 7:53-8:11 is far more widespread than we already know, which is troublesome for those making this point.

f) The fact of its existence as proof of originality

Nearly all defenders of John 7:53-8:11 as being in the original text start from the standpoint that they believe that the text has been removed. The concept of Scripture being removed is so abhorrent to them that the Periscope must be defended. There is no consideration given to the problem of a text that is not part of the original text being inserted at a later time.

Indeed, the tradition of the text being included in John is the primary reason for its defense. Whenever a possible explanation for the omission of the Periscope exists, regardless of how implausible, it is accepted as legitimate because it furthers the cause.

7. Problems with accepting John 7:53-8:11 as originally in the Gospel

The most obvious problem with accepting a text as Scripture that was not in the original text is that we are regarding an extra-biblical account as carrying the authority of the Word of God. We must be careful to faithfully represent what God says and distinguish it from what God does not say. Would authors today appreciate someone later inserting a couple of hundred words into their writing centuries later?

However, there is one additional problem that occurs with the insertion of John 7:53-8:11—the flow of the text is interrupted. The very context leading up to John 8:12 is missed due to the insertion of the Periscope. Jesus’ statement in John 8:12 that “I am the light of the world” is set directly against the Pharisees’ assertion that no prophet arises from Galilee. The Jews viewed the region of Galilee as a Gentile land (cf. Matthew 4:15) and Jesus’ statement was in response to them. He was a prophet but His audience was not only the Jews but was the Gentiles also. The man from the Gentile land of Galilee was the light of the world.

8. The inclusion in the John 7:53-8:11 by modern translations

Virtually all English translations put this text in its traditional location. Modern translations typically include a note to the effect that this passage is not found in most of the oldest manuscripts. However, the average reader is completely unaware of this note, and being familiar with the story of the woman and seeing its placement in the Gospel might reasonably conclude that it is part of the Bible even if they read the footnote.

The presence of a traditional and emotional attachment to John 7:53-8:11 is undeniably strong. It persists due to what leading textual scholar Daniel Wallace calls “a tradition of timidity.”

It is no small thing for a publisher to put their reputation at risk by removing such a popular story from the Bible. There would be a good deal of vitriolic criticism, which is never helpful to any business looking to make a profit from sales. The financial bottom line has long been the primary factor for decision making in the Christian publishing industry for a long time. Hence the compromise by including the account with footnotes.

9. How should we teach John 7:53-8:11?

Many people are aware of the textual issues with John 7:53-8:11 but believe it must be an authentic historical account since it is ancient. However, there are other ancient historical accounts that are extra-biblical. Should we teach those texts?

Pastors have the same challenge as publishers, namely the perspectives of their audience. The idea of explaining that a part of the Bible that people own is unappealing to the vast majority of pastors. Some will note that this passage is not found in the oldest and best manuscripts but proceed to treat the text just like those who believe it is part of the original text. The end result is the same where a passage that is not original is communicated with the same authority as God’s Word.

The best way to deal with this passage is with complete truthfulness. We should teach its history and its place in the text and not mislead people in order to conform to their preconceived bias. People are matured in their faith through the truth, not through telling them what they want to hear.

10. Application

“Acquire a greater understanding of the biblical text”