

The Woman Caught in Adultery

When we turn to John 7:53 – 8:11, many modern translations include a note:

- “The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11.” (ESV)
- “Later mss [manuscripts] add the story of the adulterous woman, numbering it as John 7:53-8:11” (NASB)
- “The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53—8:11. A few manuscripts include these verses, wholly or in part, after John 7:36, John 21:25, Luke 21:38 or Luke 24:53.” (NIV)

Other translations or paraphrases may only mark the text with [square brackets] (HCSB, NRSV) or an * asterisk (NLV). Clearly there is something unusual about this passage, and different translations and commentaries have different ways of explaining and dealing with the peculiarity.

What do we, as diligent students of the Scriptures, do with this bump in the road in our study of the Gospel of John? We need some background information to make sense even of the brief explanatory footnotes.

It would probably be difficult to find a commentary on the Gospel of John that does not at least mention the problem. Some brief commentaries with more of a devotional emphasis may not, but a commentary or study Bible intended to help us get the most out of Scripture almost certainly will provide some additional explanation. J.A. Bengel’s exhortation comes to mind: **“Read nothing into the Scriptures, but draw everything from them, and suffer nothing to remain hidden that is really in them.”**

To begin the discussion, few if any serious New Testament scholars would argue that the passage in question was part of John’s original manuscript. The passage is not included in any existing manuscript of John’s Gospel before the fifth century.¹ Furthermore, some doubt that it was written by John. The style and vocabulary of this short section (eighty-two words in the Greek text) are unlike the rest of John’s Gospel.² Some suggest it sounds more like the style of the Synoptic writers (Matthew, Mark, or Luke).³ In fact, as the NIV footnote mentions (quoted above), some later manuscripts include the same text as part of Luke’s Gospel. Finally, even those who support the inspired nature of the text recognize that it “disrupts the logical development of chapters 7-9”⁴ in John’s narrative.

The fact that the story (or *pericope* if you are reading technical commentaries) is found in a variety of places in and outside of John’s Gospel (again, see the NIV footnote) leads one commentator to call the familiar passage “a text looking for a context.”⁵

Then the question becomes, “So what?” Does it matter? Is the passage part of Scripture? Is it inspired? Is the text authoritative and normative for our lives? We want everything possible out of Scripture, but do we treat extra-Biblical material with the same respect and reverence and submission? How do we understand and value the inspiration of Scripture? Doesn’t God use other sources of truth?

¹ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 247.

² Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 245.

³ C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1962), 491.

⁴ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11; The New American Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 294.

⁵ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11; The New American Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 369.

The opinions of New Testament scholars (all of whom agree that the passage is not part of John's original writing) are quite varied. For example:

- “This little story captures magnificently both the gracious, forgiving spirit of Jesus and his firm call to the transformation of life. I consider this text to be divinely inspired and fully authoritative for life.”⁶
- “It may be that stories on this theme were current in several forms at an early date but did not attain canonical status because they seemed inconsistent with the strict disciplinary treatment of adultery then customary.... The historical value of the story cannot be assessed by objective standards, but the opinion may fairly be held that (1) it closely resembles in form and style the synoptic narratives (especially the style of Luke; see the notes); and (2) it represents the character and method of Jesus as they are revealed elsewhere. It may have been inserted at this point in John to illustrate the saying of 8. 15, I judge no man.”⁷
- “Those who believe that authorship is a primary criterion for canonicity will suspect or even reject this passage. Most of Christendom, however, has received this story as authoritative, and modern scholarship, although concluding firmly that it was not a part of John's Gospel originally, has generally recognized that this story describes an event from the life of Christ. Furthermore, it is as well written and a theologically profound as anything else in the Gospels.”⁸
- “the fact remains that the account almost certainly was not part of the original Gospel and therefore should not be regarded as part of the Christian canon. Nor does inspiration extend to it. In principle, the pericope is no different from other possibly authentic sayings of Jesus that may be found in NT apocryphal literature. Thus, though it may be possible to derive a certain degree of edification from the study of this pericope, proper conservatism and caution suggest that the passage be omitted from preaching in the churches (not to mention inclusion in the main body of translation even within square brackets.)”⁹

The diversity of opinions raises practical questions:

- Is authorship important? Whitacre seems to underrate it. If John didn't write it, is it inspired?
- Do we decide a text is inspired because it matches our ideas about Jesus (Borchert)? What about a lot of other non-canonical documents about Jesus from the first few centuries?
- If our ideas about Jesus take precedence over evidence of authorship or textual authenticity we can go many different routes.
 - Thomas Jefferson used a sharp blade and glue to create his own version of the Bible that excluded the miraculous but (supposedly) preserved the moral teachings of Jesus.¹⁰
 - Dan Brown used documents from later centuries (and generally considered to be products of gnostic heresies) to suggest that Jesus was married.¹¹

⁶ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11; The New American Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 376.

⁷ C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1962), 491.

⁸ Rodney A. Whitacre, *John; The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 204.

⁹ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 248.

¹⁰ <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-thomas-jefferson-created-his-own-bible-5659505/?no-ist> accessed August 23, 2015.

¹¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

Both of these examples selected (or ignored) documents based on subjective opinions about that Jesus was like and what He did. Both these examples resulted from ignoring textual and authorship evidence. Our understanding of who Jesus is constitutes the center of our Faith. That understanding must come *from* the pages of Scripture, rather than using that understanding (or wishful thinking) to determine what documents constitute Scripture.

- If it is a true, historical account of something Jesus did, but was added to the canon later (Barrett), is it Scripture? Wouldn't the Mormons say that about their book?
- Is there value in edification without inspiration (Kostenberger), and where do we make the distinction?

My conclusion is essentially that of Kostenberger, that the story inserted into various places in John or Luke by well-meaning scribes or others is not part of John's writing (or Luke's), is not canonical and should not be accorded the status of inspired Scripture. The text can and should be read (as should other devotional literature) for its edifying and inspirational value, but not considered authoritative.

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