

**Q&A #7 | *Pericopae Adulterae***  
May 29, 2011

**Question:** What are we to make of John 7:53-8:11? Can it be considered "S"cripture since it is absent from all the "oldest" manuscripts? Can we even say it is apart of John's original gospel? I ask this question because my ESV says that it "should not be regarded as Scripture" and I wanted to hear your view.

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**Answer:** It seems that many (if not most) commentators and scholars think that this passage did not belong in John's original gospel. The reasons have to do with manuscript evidence and internal evidence. However, there is reason to believe this passage is historical and there are truths we can glean for our growth, others good and God's glory.

**MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE**

The Bible is the best historical document the world has ever known. One of the reasons for this statement is that the New Testament has an incomparably large amount of manuscripts that date from very early on. There are over 20,000 copies of the New Testament manuscripts in existence today. This is important because historical reliability weighs heavily on whether or not there are multiple attestations to the document in question. The more copies there are the more reliable the document is. More is better.

So when asking the question about the adultery passage's placement in John's original gospel it is wise for us to look at the manuscript evidence. Does this section show up in the early manuscripts? If so, how many times does it show up? The fact is, John 7:53-8:11 is not included in the earliest manuscripts (prior to the 6<sup>th</sup> century). Professor Gary Burge says, "This story is absent form all major Greek manuscripts that bear the strongest, earliest witness to John original form" and even when it does show up in later manuscripts (in the ninth century) the, "scribes expressed reservations by making editorial comments in the margin of the text."<sup>1</sup> Another notable scholar says, "The textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the Gospel."<sup>2</sup> In addition to being absent in the earliest manuscripts, this section is not found attributed to John in the testimony of early church fathers either. "With one exception no Greek Father mentions the passage for one thousand years. Lectionaries and commentaries alike fail t mention it. Origen's commentary on John moves from 7:52 to 8:12. Even where Tertullian gives judicial directions for cases of

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<sup>1</sup> Burge, Gary, *The New Application Commentary* (2000), 238

<sup>2</sup> Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John* (1971), p. 882

adultery, he makes no reference to this most obvious passage from John.”<sup>3</sup> So, from the manuscript evidence, or lack thereof, it is in the common opinion of scholars that John 7:53-8:11 was not in the original text of John’s gospel.

## **INTERNAL EVIDENCE**

When looking into the internal evidence of an ancient document, one is looking to see if the document at hand makes sense within itself. So the question we now will ask of the adultery passage is whether or not it lines up with the rest of John. For many reasons, this passage does not line up with the immediate context or the rest of the gospel styling of John.<sup>4</sup> First, this passage is literarily awkward. In John 7:37-39 Jesus is speaking to a crowd and, when 8:12 resumes, the same crowd is still before Him. But in the adultery passage, Jesus is left alone (8:9). If we were to take this story out, the narrative of John would flow smoothly from 7:1 to 8:59. Secondly, scholars point to numerous words and grammatical forms that are not consistent with the rest of John’s writing. So when put up against the rest of John, this passage is not consistent in the flowing narrative nor the style and form John uses in the rest of His book.

## **OUR CONCLUSION AND SOME EXTRA THOUGHTS**

In light of these summarized arguments it is easily observed that this passage found in contemporary translations of John was not in the original gospel penned by the Apostle. In other words, John didn’t record this in his gospel, but it was added later.

How are we to respond to this news? Should we throw this passage out and treat it with contempt? Should we glean moralistic teaching from it, but not doctrinal truth? What is the best way to approach this passage? Let me offer a few simple thoughts.

- 1- Although this passage wasn’t in John’s original gospel, there is good reason to believe it to be historical. This account, although it doesn’t show up in John’s earliest manuscripts is attested to by early church fathers such as Ambrose (d. 397), Ambrosiaster (d. 350) and Augustine (d. 430) and is even hinted at by Eusebius (the church’s first historian) where he, “says he learned a story coming from Papias (A.D. 60-130) about a woman who was maliciously accused before Jesus concerning her sins.”<sup>5</sup> Just because it isn’t in John’s original gospel, does not mean it is untrue.

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<sup>3</sup> Burge, Gary, *The New Application Commentary* (2000), 238

<sup>4</sup> The following argument are taken from Burge in the *New Application Commentary*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 239

- 2- In this passage we see both the mercy of Christ and the seriousness with which Jesus treats sin. Jesus comes to the woman with compassion and mercy, none of which she deserves. She had committed adultery, broken God's Law, defied her husband, dishonored her parents, and brought shame upon herself. She is no innocent victim. However, although she is guilty, Jesus brings mercy and grace to her that she doesn't deserve. Oh the grace seen in this passage. A willing lawbreaker, on her knees in remorse, find the Savior instead of the sword. Jesus is merciful. But Jesus is also serious. He does not ignore her sin. Jesus tells her, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (8:11). Upon receiving His forgiveness she also received His command toward new life. Jesus' compassion and mercy is received undeserved, but not without His call to repentance. This woman received the kindness of Christ, but she was commanded by the same man to leave her life of sin
  
- 3- The Pharisees in this passage want to trap Jesus at the expense of this woman. They aren't as concerned about her sin or welfare as they are about getting Jesus in between a rock and a hard place. They want to win their argument so badly, they don't care who they'll hurt in the process. This passage beckons all Christians to be careful. The message is: while you seek the Truth of God never sacrifice the mercy of God at its altar. The Pharisees became men who wanted to win their arguments rather than win people to God. They were self-interested and this was their curse. Be careful to not gain the attitude of the Pharisees. May our love for God translate in a desire for others good before Him and not their demise.