

John 7:53-8:11

In most translations, this passage is separated from the surrounding passages. The NIV states that “the earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11.” The facts concerning this passage and its inclusion in the New Testament are these:

- There is no “early” manuscript evidence for this passage; early copies of the Gospel of John simply do not have it.
- The only “relatively-early” manuscripts of John containing this passage are found in the East (Jerusalem, North Africa).
- The Ancient Christian commentators largely ignore this passage. (The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture has quotes from Augustine, Bede, Gregory the Great, and Jerome, the earliest of these was from the late 4th Century.)
- This passage is found in different locations in different manuscripts, indicating it was added later.
- This is the only place in the Gospel of John that refers to the “Scribes.” (Matthew, Mark and Luke all refer to the Scribes numerous times.)

So if this passage was not a part of the original manuscript that John wrote, what should we do with it? Call it quits and go home early? Or should we view it in the same way we view the Apocrypha: not necessarily inspired, but useful for teaching?

The New International Commentary on the New Testament has this to say: “But if we cannot feel that this is part of John’s Gospel, we can feel that the story is true to the character of Jesus. Throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic. It rings true. It speaks to our condition.”

Because we are operating under the assumption that this passage was added later and has a different author than the rest of the Gospel, we will look at this passage in isolation, we will not be cross-referencing it to other passages or fitting it into the larger picture of the Gospel of John.

8:3

The religious leaders had caught the woman in the act of adultery. This means what it says. According to the Law (Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22), both the man and the woman were to be prosecuted for adultery. That the man was not present indicates that he was allowed to escape. More than that, the Law did not require the woman to be brought to Jesus for her “trial.” Why do you think the man was not there, but the woman was brought in plain sight of Jesus?

8:5

Moses did command that the guilty parties be put to death, but stoning was not required. Why do you think the Pharisees and Scribes added words to the Law of Moses?

8:6

If Jesus says “Yes” to their demand for execution, he is going against the Roman authorities, which refused to execute for the crime of adultery; if Jesus says “No” to their demand for execution, he is going against the Law of Moses. The trap is a simple one, and so is Jesus’ method of avoiding it.

No one knows what Jesus wrote in the ground. No one knows if he even wrote words. Did Jesus write to take attention off of the woman caught in adultery? Did he write the sins of the Scribes and Pharisees in the dirt? We do not know.

8:7

We do not know what Jesus wrote in the ground with his finger, but much attention has been given to what happens next: the Scribes and Pharisees CONTINUE TO QUESTION JESUS. What did they ask him? Did they bring further charges against the woman caught in adultery? Did they accuse Jesus of any wrongdoing?

We do not know what Jesus wrote and we do not know what the further questioning was all about. Why all the unanswerables? Because these are not the main foci of the text; this is not what is important.

Jesus’ reply neither lets the woman caught in adultery off the hook, nor does it allow those bringing charges against her to punish her for her wrongdoing. The Scribes and Pharisees are all guilty of sin; they set a trap for the woman, something the law forbid them from doing.

8:9

The old men leave first because they know they will be held responsible for the crime of setting a trap for the woman caught in adultery. They have not come to a realization of their sin and no longer wish the young woman to be set free; they are in fear of their lives, their freedom, and their standing in the community as ones who keep the Law.

8:10

Notice how the author begins the passage, with Jesus sitting down to teach. Now notice how he has been down twice and stood up twice in the presence of the woman caught in the act of adultery.

8:11

This is the main focus of the text: Jesus does not condemn the woman caught in adultery. He does not excuse what she did; he does not give a carte blanche for her sinful behavior, he simply refuses to condemn her, to put her to death. (See John 3:16-17.)

Questions

Why do you think this text was added to the Gospel of John?

Why do you think most of our modern translations have kept this passage as part of the Gospel of John, despite knowing it was not part of the original text?

What is the major lesson to be learned from this text? In other words, what does this text tell us about Jesus?

What other passages in the Gospels does this text remind you of?

How does Jesus comment at the end of the passage support our understanding of the relationship between the gospel and obedience to the Law?