

## The Text of Scripture and John 7:53-8:11

In our last look at John's Gospel, a number of months ago now, we finished at chapter 7, verse 52. Now, as we return to our study of this Gospel, we are picking up our study at 8:12, omitting the popular, but much contested account of the woman caught in adultery that runs from 7:53 through to 8:11.

Why are we skipping over this passage? Simply put, because it is my suspicion, based on the evidence given by numerous textual scholars, that *this story is not part of the inspired canon of Scripture*.

Now, believe me, I know that is a pretty audacious statement to make. And it is not an easy thing for me to say. But those of you who know me well enough will know that when it comes to the Bible, I am deadly serious about the importance of the Scriptures and so you should know that this is not a matter that I treat lightly.

So, again, what would cause me to come to such a conclusion about a portion of the Bible that has been taught and cherished for so many years, by so many of God's people? Well, I can assure you that on my own I would have never have come to this place. However, as a result of the work of hundreds of scholars - especially in the last 30 years - the growing consensus in *evangelical* circles is that these verses - while certainly not out of character at all with the person of Jesus - are nevertheless not properly a part of the original manuscript of John's Gospel. Indeed, if you have a modern translation such as the NIV, or the ESV you will see that these verses are either bracketed off or are otherwise set apart and an explanatory note is attached to them that explains their doubtful origins. Indeed one modern translation, the RSV, in some printings has completely removed these verses from the main text and, instead, has placed them as a footnote at the bottom of the page.

In seeking to understand how all of this has come about it is important to say, on the front end, that much of the evidence that has led scholars to these conclusions is technical and beyond the scope of a paper such as this. However, it is still possible, in my view, to point out at least some of the major contributing factors to this state of affairs.

But before we look at those, it is helpful to think for a moment about the text of Scripture, and how it is that we have come to possess the Bible that we do. To help us with that I will reproduce here the text of some previous studies we have done on the doctrine of Scripture, starting with the observation that the Bible that we hold in our hands is a *translation*.

In other words, we read the Bible in English. Germans read it in German. Brazilians read it in Portuguese. But the language we read it in is not the language that the Bible was *written* in. The Bible was written in a *different language* and, in fact, in *three* different languages. The Old Testament is mostly written in *Hebrew*, with a smattering of *Aramaic* ((Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Daniel 2:4-7:28; Jeremiah 10:11) and the NT was written in *Greek*.

And not only was the Bible originally written in different languages, it was written *a long time ago*, and over the space of about 1500 years. And, of course, this was necessarily the case since God's revelation of what He was doing and why He was doing it came to us over a long period of time. And since God determined to give us revelation through a long period of time, he made use of a number of different authors - roughly 40, or so.

And here's where the plot thickens a little bit. We do not have *any* of the original writings, from *any* of these original authors, for *any* book in the Bible. We don't have Moses' original manuscript of the Book of Genesis. We don't have any of Isaiah's original documents. We don't have Luke's original Gospel.

Indeed, the earliest *reference* - that we know of so far - to any of the original documents is contained in the works of someone named Peter of Alexandria - who, in one of his writings, talks about the Church at Ephesus still having in their possession the original copy of John's Gospel. Now Peter of Alexandria died around 311 AD - roughly 280 years after Jesus' death. Another writer named Tertullian also makes a reference to the originals - also known as "autographs" or "autographa". He died around 220 AD - but his reference is not as certain. But the point is, we know the originals existed and were, at one time, in the possession of God's people. But we do not, at this point, have any of them.

Now you might ask, "How do you know that we don't have any of the originals?" Well we know because the documents we *do* have are not as old as they would need to be in order to have been written by the people whose name they bear. When you piece together the history of the events recorded in Scripture, and then through that develop a timeline of when things would have happened and when different people - like Moses and Isaiah - would have lived, then you come up with a range of dates in which the books they authored would have to have been written.

And then you look at the manuscripts - the hand-written copies of the Bible - that we have at our disposal and determine the date of those manuscripts you see that there is a *gap* between the time when the original was written, and the date of the earliest copy or earliest *fragment* of a copy of that book.

So, for example, the Gospel of John would have to have been written somewhere around 90 AD - roughly 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The earliest manuscript *copy* we have of John's Gospel is not a complete manuscript at all. In fact, it is really only a fragment known as the "John Rylands - P52" fragment and it contains five partial verses from the Gospel and was likely written somewhere between 100 and 125 AD.

How many of these manuscripts do we have? Well, we have - in whole or in part - more than 7000 different manuscripts from which we draw the 66 books of the Bible. Some of these manuscripts - typically the newer ones - are a complete collection of the Old Testament, or the New Testament - or both. Many, many more, and typically more of the older ones might be a complete copy of a single book of the Bible, or a partial copy, or a copy of a chapter or a paragraph or - as we have just seen - a handful of verses.

Now unless you have studied ancient manuscripts, these numbers might not mean much to you. So let me just give you an idea of how the copies of the Bible compare to the manuscripts that we have of *other* ancient writings.

For example, take Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, which was written about 54 years before Christ's birth. For this ancient work we have a *handful* - literally - of manuscripts, but only 9 or 10 of them are of any use, and the *oldest* of them was written 900 years after Caesar died. So, for Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, there is a 900 year gap between the *original* and the oldest surviving *copy*. And there are only about 9 or 10 useful copies.

The *History of Thucydides*, written around 430 BC has only 8 surviving manuscripts, the earliest of which was written around 900 AD - a gap of more than 1300 years between original and copy. The *History of Herodotus*, written at nearly the same time, is in the same sort of situation - very few manuscripts and at least a 1300 year gap between the original and the oldest copy.

And yet, as Edward Goodrick, the scholar upon whose work I am depending heavily for this paper, has pointed out, in spite of the great distance between originals and copies of originals in these *classic* works "no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt" because of the gap.

Compare these sorts of figures with the Bible and you see that there is a *remarkable* difference. The number of manuscripts that we have to work with, when it comes to the Bible, is over 7000. Take any other piece of literature of the same age - from anywhere in the world - and what you discover is that the number of manuscripts we have of the Bible exceeds even the most *well* attested ancient manuscripts by a factor of *a hundred to one*. There are 100 times more Bible manuscripts than there are of *any* other literature of similar age.

And the range of these Bible manuscripts varies from things like the John Rylands fragment - which is within 10-20 years of the original - to manuscripts like the Codex Vaticanus or Sinaiticus, written around 350 AD - to other manuscripts dating from the 1400's. And we are finding new manuscripts all the time. In short, the Bible is *extremely* well attested in its documentation.

Well, what do you do with all these manuscripts - some of them small, some of them extensive? How do you get a Bible out of *that*? Well, imagine that you had 7000 people, all of them with a box containing, essentially, the same jigsaw puzzle. But very few of the boxes are exactly the same. Some people have a puzzle with pieces that are over a 1000 years old. Other people have a box with pieces that are about 500 years old. And some have a box that has pieces that are over 1700 years old! And there are other differences. Some people, generally the people with the newer boxes, have a lot of the pieces of the puzzle, with even a smaller number of them that have a whole collection. Others, on the other hand, have only a few pieces of the same puzzle that are pretty worn around the edges. While the individual value of these various puzzles is very high, the collective value of them is of even greater importance. By holding the different collections side by side they will supplement, confirm and, in small ways, correct each other.

Well, it's not a perfect analogy, but that is something like what goes on when scholars work with the ancient manuscripts of the Bible. A piece that was missing in one person's box is found in another person's. Another piece found in a different box is found in exactly the same form in hundred's of others. This is the science of what is called "textual criticism" - which sounds like a bad thing but which, in fact, is a good and very helpful thing. It is the reason why the Bible you hold in your hand today is as coherent and readable as it is.

Text critical scholars makes use of both more recent, complete manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments - which are like the newer, and fuller "puzzle boxes" used in the analogy and which function in much the same way as the *cover* of a jigsaw puzzle - guiding you in relating the different pieces one to another. And they also make use of older and smaller fragments - which are more like the puzzle boxes with fewer pieces inside - and together with the fuller manuscripts they are able to determine with increasing certainty the exact text of the original manuscripts.

Now, of course, one place where the puzzle analogy breaks down a bit is that - with a puzzle - when you open the box you find that there is only one piece of each kind. With the Scriptures, as we've already seen, there are numerous copies of every passage - a fact which raises questions of its own, namely this: When we compare these various manuscripts and these similar copies of the same "piece" what do we discover? What do we find when we compare, for example, the five verses contained on the John Rylands fragment with the same five verses contained in a manuscript 250 years later, or even 1000 years later?

Well, what we discover is that occasionally there are *differences*. One manuscript will have an extra word in a verse while another manuscript, with the same verse, will not contain that word. One manuscript will use one form of a word while another might use a slightly different form - but with a similar meaning. The text critical scholar's job is to compare these various manuscripts and to try and determine what the *original manuscript* - the autographa - would have said, based upon what the copies are saying.

Now, you might wonder, *how* different are these manuscripts? Is there a *lot* of this going on? Are the differences substantial? Well, without going into more detail, let me try and put your mind at ease. First of all, the differences are not substantial. None of them have any bearing on any significant or core doctrine of the Scriptures.

Further, if you took all the words about which there is significant uncertainty in the manuscripts of the New Testament, and you put them on the same page, they would take up one regular sized piece of paper. To put it in other terms, the amount of the New Testament that is un-settled and disputed - in terms of the science of textual criticism - is *one-half, of one percent*.

When you turn to the Old Testament, you discover a similar reality. Now, it needs to be said that, until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the textual criticism of the OT was about 200 years behind that of the NT. For a long while, the earliest copies we had of any of the Old Testament books were more than a 1000 years older than the original manuscripts.

But then, in 1947, a boy was playing around some caves in the Middle East and was throwing rocks into one of them when he heard something that sounded like glass breaking. When he went into the cave to see what his rock had hit, he discovered these large pieces of pottery which contained scrolls - manuscripts - of the Old Testament. The remarkable thing about these scrolls was that, on the one hand, some of them were 1000 years closer to the original than the best manuscripts we had at that point. On the other hand, even more remarkable than their age was their *accuracy* or rather, what they revealed about the accuracy of the Old Testament. When scholars starting comparing these new, much earlier copies of the old Testament books - like Isaiah - with the later ones we had been working with, they discovered that they were virtually identical.

And so, if you had to put a figure on what the amount of variation is between the various Old Testament manuscripts, it would be slightly higher than the NT, but not by much, and in any case, still less than one percent. So, while we do not have any of the original manuscripts, we can nevertheless see God's providential hand in the fact that over centuries of transmission the copies we *do* possess have remained faithful to those originals.

With that as a background, we are in a better position to think about the "problem" of John 7:53-8:11. The problem, in a nutshell, is simply this: When we look at all of the earliest manuscripts of John's Gospel *these verses are not there*. In other words, all of the earliest manuscripts we have of John's Gospel show chapter 7 ending at verse 52 and chapter 8 starting with verse 12. The story of the woman caught in adultery just isn't there. One writer, Robert Rayburn, expands on this,

*Among the manuscripts that do not have the paragraph [about the woman caught in adultery] are a good many that are widely believed, on other grounds, to be very fine copies of the New Testament text. To put it simply, many Christian people who lived in the first centuries of the Christian era, would have not known of this text, would never have heard a sermon on it, and wouldn't have found it in their Bibles, had they been fortunate enough to own a copy, or seen it in the Bible they may have seen and read at church.*

*And it isn't just that the paragraph is missing. In many of these manuscripts the text follows on 7:52 with 8:12 with no hint of a break, no suggestion whatsoever that something else once went between the two verses. I've seen a photo-facsimile edition of one of the great 4<sup>th</sup> century Bible's, Codex Sinaiticus, and on this page of the Gospel of John it reads without a break or the hint of a break between 7:52 and 8:12. There is no suggestion whatsoever that there ever was such a paragraph as our 8:1-11 or that anyone thought there was. Moreover, a number of later manuscripts that do include this paragraph mark it with asterisks or other signs to indicate that there is some problem as to its authenticity.*

To these remarks, Rayburn adds,

*[The] manuscripts that omit the paragraph include not only Greek texts of the NT but, as well, a number of early versions or translations of the NT. The early Syriac versions of the NT, the Coptic versions from Egypt, and some early Armenian and Georgian manuscripts omit it.*

*What is more, all the early church Fathers omit it. In commenting on John they pass directly from 7:52 to 8:12. No Greek speaking and writing church father cites the passage before the 12<sup>th</sup> century, more than a thousand years after the writing of the Gospel of John, and the first one to cite it declares that the accurate copies of the Gospel do not contain it.*

*But that is not all. Although most of the manuscripts of the Gospel of John that **do** contain this story place it here, between 7:52 and 8:12, others do not. Some place it after 7:44 or 7:36 or John 21:25. Indeed, some put this paragraph after Luke 21:38! It is interesting, by the way, that the style and vocabulary of this paragraph concerning the woman caught in adultery differ noticeably from that of the rest of the Gospel of John. In fact it contains expressions and constructions that are more characteristic of the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke than the Gospel of John. Indeed, the story itself has a number of parallels with other stories in the other three gospels.*

So, if the passage is not part of the original, how did it end up in the some of the later copies? And the answer is: no one knows for sure. What we do know, however, is that there were all sorts of things that Jesus said and did which never made it into the Bible. The Gospel of John itself tells us this,

**John 21:25** *Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

There is no reason to doubt that the story of the woman caught in adultery may well be one of “the many other things that Jesus did”, and which people were aware of and that got passed down, by word of mouth, from one person to the next until someone decided that it ought to be included in the Bible and started looking for a place to fit it in. Indeed, it appears that several people had the same idea, which would account for its being inserted into different places.

Even then, as Andrew has pointed out in a paper he wrote, the *internal* evidence against the passage is also a problem. In other words, when you compare the greek of this story, with the greek writing style and vocabulary of the rest of John, you discover that it is markedly different - as if it was written by a different person with a different style. Indeed, as NT scholar Don Carson has said, it is more like the writing style of Matthew, Mark and Luke than it is of John. And so, even if you allowed that it was an authentic story, you would be hard pressed to show that it was original to *John*.

At the end of the day, then, we have to make a decision about this passage and what we are to do with it. I can do no better than Robert Rayburn's summation of the matter and so will leave you with these closing comments in a talk he gave to his own congregation:

*...most scholars feel that John 8:1-11 was not part of the Gospel John wrote and that it is much harder to explain how it disappeared from so many early manuscripts and from the knowledge of the church fathers than to explain how it might have been added in, wittingly or unwittingly, later on. And that is my conclusion as well. What we have before us in John 8:1-11 may well be an accurate record of an actual event in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. But it is not part of Holy Scripture and so is not the Word of God and so cannot be preached as "Thus says the Lord." We can't even be sure that it is real history, as we can be, of course, with all the events that the Gospel writers really did record.*

*So, there will be no sermon on John 8:1-11. It is the honor we pay to the Holy Word of God that we do not preach anything that is not the Word of God as the Word of God. You may feel, and with certain justification no doubt, that this morning's sermon has done you little good. After all, we have talked of manuscripts and scholarly debates and not about faith or love or hope or Jesus Christ.*

*But the edifice of our entire faith in Jesus Christ rests finally upon the foundation of the Word of God. Those questions that concern the Bible and its integrity, therefore, are fundamental to our faith. It may not be as immediately interesting to you or as immediately helpful as a sermon on some text of the Gospel of John, but it is not unimportant for that reason. If we aspire to be mature Christians with a solid understanding of the Bible, we must tackle these questions too.....*