

The Gospel of John (51) The Woman taken in Adultery

Introduction:

We arrive to an episode that records a woman taken in adultery who is brought before Jesus. The event is an effort of the scribes and Pharisees to obtain some charge against Jesus by which they could at least discredit Him, if not eliminate Him. But when our Lord addressed the situation, He revealed His wisdom in that He exposed their hypocrisy and duplicity in trying to find fault with Him. In the process of exposing them, the Lord spared this woman's life even as He admonished her to repent of her sins.

Let us read the account, beginning with John 7:53.

⁵³And everyone went to his own house.

¹But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

²Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. ³Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, ⁴they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. ⁵Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" ⁶This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear.

⁷So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." ⁸And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. ¹⁰When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹She said, "No one, Lord."

And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

I. A word about the text itself

This entire episode has had a disputed history whether or not it was originally penned by the Apostle John when he first wrote this Fourth Gospel. Usually study Bibles will make some mention of this. My Reformation Study Bible has the heading in brackets above this section: [The Earliest Manuscripts do not include 7:53-8:11].¹ In order to explain this matter, we will need to describe the historical process through which we have our present day translations before us. I thought that this episode could serve us in addressing this important matter.

A. The textual history of our Bibles

When we speak of our belief in the Bible as the written Word of God, we assert that the Bible is inerrant, infallible, and authoritative in all that it states and claims. The Scriptures themselves declare:

¹ R. C. Sproul, gen. ed., **The Reformation Study Bible** (ESV) (Reformation Trust, 2015), p. 1869.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16f)

And the Apostle Peter wrote of the Holy Scriptures:

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; ²⁰knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, ²¹for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Pet. 1:19-21)

But it is important to understand that when we speak of the inspired and infallible Holy Scriptures, we are speaking specifically of the documents when they were originally penned. God directly inspired and superintended the original writings of the biblical authors. Yes, we assert that as men copied and published those documents through the centuries, God through His providence preserved His truth for us today. But herein lies the problem: we do not have any of the original documents available for us today, but we do have copies, even copies of copies. In fact, we have over 6,000 Greek texts of either complete or partial manuscripts of the New Testament books. And if we also consider early non-Greek translations of New Testament texts, we have over 24,000 early copies or portions of our New Testament books. The earliest manuscript that we have available is in the John Ryland's Library in Manchester, England. It is called the John Ryland's Fragment. It is a papyrus manuscript, really only a scrap of papyrus, which is known by the designation p⁵². It contains just a few verses from the Gospel of John including John 18:31-33; 37-38. The date proposed for this very small fragment is approximately AD 125, which would probably have been about 30 years after John first penned his Gospel.

But of these more than 6,000 texts of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, which were produced over a period of 1500 years, no two manuscripts are identical. Because of the process of manuscript copying, variants between copies crept into the flow of historical documents. And once a variant became part of a copied manuscript, it thereafter continued to be found in subsequent copies.

The process of copying and transmission of biblical books changed due to **Johannes Gutenberg** invention of the "modern" printing press with moveable type in 1439. The first Greek New Testament was printed in 1516, having been edited by **Desiderius Erasmus**. Prior to this printing of the Greek New Testament, all copies of the New Testament had been produced by the hand of scribes over many centuries.

A scribe was a noble trade for many centuries. Some scribes were more meticulous than other scribes. Many sought to copy precisely the text before them. But many scribes did not do so. And there was no perfect scribe. No two manuscripts are identical. There are variants between them. The task of the textual critic, one formally trained in these matters, is to examine the various readings of the same passage in the various manuscripts available and attempt to determine which reading best reflects the original document of the original writer.

Now we affirm the faithfulness and accuracy of the copies that we have available to us. It should be understood that the vast majority of variants between Greek manuscripts are of minor importance, most being spelling errors that were made by scribes. It should also be recognized that if you were able to identify two texts of the New Testament that were the most different from one another in detail, there would still be no difference between them respecting the content of their teaching. No major doctrine, or even minor doctrine, is affected by the presence of variants in the manuscript tradition. When all the variants of all of the many manuscripts over the many centuries are considered, not one New Testament doctrine or teaching is changed or called into question. In other words, our God has wonderfully preserved His written Word for us that you hold in your hands today. It is the authoritative Word of God.

However, the modern work of textual criticism is a very important discipline. Textual scholars make determinations of how variants entered the manuscript tradition in their attempts to determine the precise content of the original documents. They have made determinations that some manuscripts are more true and accurate to those original writings than other manuscripts. And herein lies the reason why there are some differences here and there from one English translation to another. As we close this little introduction of the

history of the transmission of our New Testament, let me assure us of this fact: through the discovery and use of many older manuscripts, and more consistently applied principles of interpretation, the Greek text of the New Testament today is closer to the original than at any time since the first centuries of the Christian era. God has given to us a trustworthy text through His providence upon which our modern translations are based. However, the work of textual scholars continues to this day.²

Now it is helpful to understand the process that scribes used when copying their manuscripts. Variants between copies of the Greek New Testament can be better assessed when the process of copying manuscripts is understood. Scribes would commonly work as individuals, copying their texts as they looked upon the master text on the desk before them. Many scribes in monasteries performed their work in this manner for many centuries. Scribal work was hard work. Consider this description of the trade:

Something of the drudgery of copying manuscripts can be learned from the colophons, or notes, which scribes not infrequently placed at the close of their books. A typical colophon found in many non-Biblical manuscripts reveal in no uncertain terms what every scribe experienced: ‘He who does not know how to write supposes it to be no labor; but though only three fingers write, the whole body labors.’ A traditional formula appearing at the close of many manuscripts describes the physiological effects of prolonged labour at copying: ‘Writing bows one’s back, thrusts the ribs into one’s stomach, and fosters a general debility of the body.’ In an Armenian manuscript of the Gospels a colophon complains that a heavy snowstorm was raging outside and that the scribe’s ink froze, his hand became numb, and the pen fell from his fingers! It is not surprising that a frequently recurring colophon in manuscripts of many kinds is the following comparison: ‘As travelers rejoice to see their home country, so also is the end of a book to those who toil [in writing].’ Other manuscripts close with an expression of gratitude: ‘The end of a book; thanks be to God.’³

However, even though the labor was difficult, the scribe valued his work, particularly those who copied the Holy Scriptures. Here is a description of the attitude of many:

By reading the divine Scriptures [the scribe] wholesomely instructs his own mind, and by copying the precepts of the Lord he spreads them far and wide. What happy application, what praiseworthy industry, to preach unto men by means of the hand, to untie the tongue by means of the fingers, to bring quiet salvation to mortals, and to fight the devil’s insidious wiles with pen and ink! For every word of the Lord written by the scribe is a wound inflicted on satan. And so, though seated in one spot, the scribe traverses diverse lands through the dissemination of what he has written... Man multiplies the heavenly words, and in a certain metaphorical sense, if I may dare so to speak, three fingers are made to express the utterances of the Holy Trinity. O sight glorious to those who contemplate it carefully! The fast-traveling reed-pen writes down the holy words and thus avenges the malice of the Wicked One, who caused a reed to be used to smite the head of the Lord during his Passion.⁴

Commonly, however, rather than scribes laboring in monasteries, they performed their transcribing work in scribal schools, which were business ventures, for texts were very expensive and relatively rare. The scribe in a scribal school would often sit at a desk in a room, with many other scribes. They would write out their text as the master scribe overseeing their work read it to them. As the text was read, the scribe would write what he heard.

² Our discussion here is only with regard to our New Testament manuscripts, not the Old Testament. The Old Testament Jewish scribes were much more careful and diligent in their copying of the Old Testament texts than were the Greek and Latin scribes who copied the New Testament books. The transmission of the Old Testament text warrants another discussion on another occasion.

³ Bruce Metzger, **The Text of the New Testament; Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration** (Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 17f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Now when one examines variants from Greek text to Greek text, one can assess in many cases the likely original cause of the variant when first penned. Variants can commonly be judged to be either the result of faulty *hearing* or faulty *sight* on the part of the scribe.⁵ For example, if the scribe was sitting at his desk and was writing his text as the master scribe read the text, *errors of hearing* would frequently occur. These would often be spelling errors. For example, in the Greek language there are vowels and combination of vowels that often had a similar or even identical sound.⁶ Just as in English we have words like “great” and “grate”, “there” and “their”, so in Greek there are words that sound identical but are spelled differently. When the scribe was performing his work alone, copying a manuscript that was before him, *errors of faulty sight* were commonly introduced to the text.

One more word may be helpful for us before moving onward, there are a number of evangelicals who espouse that the King James Version of the English Bible is the only translation that God has preserved without error to the present day. The Greek text that stands behind the KJV is commonly known as the *Textus Receptus*, which some claim to be the only inerrant Greek text available to us. But the term, *Textus Receptus*, was not ascribed to a Greek text until 1633, 117 years after Erasmus published the first edition of his Greek New Testament in 1516, and 22 years after the King James Version was produced. The term, *Textus Receptus*, was actually a publisher’s promotion of the text in the book’s preface. Here is an account of how the term came into use:

In 1624 the brothers Bonaventure and Abraham Elzevir, two enterprising printers in Leiden, published a small and convenient edition of the Greek Testament, the text of which was taken mainly from Beza’s smaller 1565 edition. The preface to the second edition, which appeared in 1633, makes the boast that “[the reader has] the text which is now received by all, in which we give nothing changed or corrupted’. Thus from what was a more or less casual phrase advertising the edition (what modern publishers might call a ‘blurb’), there arose the designation ‘Textus Receptus’, or commonly received, standard text. Partly because of this catchword the form of the Greek text incorporated in the editions that Stephanus, Beza, and the Elzevirs had published succeeded in establishing itself as ‘the only true text’ of the New Testament, and was lavishly reprinted in hundreds of subsequent editions. It lies at the basis of the King James Version and all the principle Protestant translations in the languages of Europe since 1881. So superstitious has been the reverence accorded the *Textus Receptus* that in some cases attempts to emend it have been regarded as akin to sacrilege. Yet its textual basis is essentially a handful of late and haphazardly collected miniscule (lower case letters) manuscripts, and in a dozen passages its readings is supported by no known Greek witness.⁷

B. Our passage and in its textual history

Now in consideration of all that we have said about this process of transmitting texts, what can we say about the passage before us of the woman caught in adultery being brought before Jesus? The fact is that this episode of John 7:53 through 8:11 is not to be found in a number of the older Greek manuscripts of the Gospel according to John. It is omitted in the text called the *Codex Sinaiticus*, which is one of our oldest complete Greek New Testament texts, which dates to the 4th century AD.⁸ It is also not found in the *Codex Vaticanus*, which is also a 4th century text, but it is generally not as highly regarded as Codex Sinaiticus. The passage is found in a number of manuscripts in which it is set apart with asterisks supplied by the scribes, indicating that the passage was disputed in their minds. Interestingly, there are some manuscripts

⁵ There were scribes who made intentional changes to the text they were copying, but that is another matter for another time.

⁶ A “diphthong” is when two vowels are together in a word that combines to make one sound. We have diphthongs in English, such as words with the combination of vowels, “ae,” “ai,” “ou,” “eu.” In Greek there are several different spelled diphthongs that apparently all had the same sound, some believe to have been a long “ee” sound. This is a source of many variants in New Testament Greek manuscripts.

⁷ Ibid, p. 106.

⁸ It is on display today in the British Library in London.

that contain this passage, but place it in a different context. There is a manuscript that has this episode after John 21:25, in other words, it is placed after the end of the Gospel. In another manuscript it is placed following John 7:36. In another manuscript it is found in Luke's Gospel after Luke 21:38, and in another it is found after Luke 24:53, in other words after the end of the Gospel of Luke.

I found it interesting that **F. F. Bruce** in his commentary of the Gospel of John passes completely over this episode, only mentioning it in a footnote which directs the reader to an appendix in which he addressed the episode. But in his commentary itself he passes from John 7:52 directly to John 8:12. **Leon Morris** also relegated his comments to this episode to an appendix in his commentary.⁹

In introducing the subject in his appendix **F. F. Bruce** wrote these words:

These twelve verses are ruled off from the preceding and following context in NIV, they are relegated to a footnote in the RSV and printed on a separate page after the Gospel in the NEB, under the heading 'An incident in the temple'. They are missing from a wide variety of early Greek manuscripts from the earliest forms of the Syriac and Coptic Gospels, from several Armenian, Old Georgian and Old Latin manuscripts, and from the Gothic Bible. They constitute, in fact, a fragment of authentic gospel material not originally included in any of the four Gospels. Its preservation (for which we are thankful) is due to the fact that it was inserted at what seemed to be a not inappropriate place in the Gospel of John or of Luke... In style it has closer affinities with the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) than with John. One reason for its being placed in this context in John may have been the idea that it served as an illustration of Jesus' words in 8:15, 'I judge no one'.¹⁰

Even though there is this textual problem between various manuscripts, most scholars declare the passage to be a genuine episode recorded of our Lord and this woman taken in adultery. The footnote in the New Reformation Study Bible states concerning this passage:

These verses are not present in some Greek manuscripts, and in others they appear at different locations, such as after John 7:36 or elsewhere in John, or even in Luke. This diversity makes it uncertain that this incident with the adulterous woman and her accusers appeared at this or any point in John's original document, but its presentation of Jesus is consistent with the rest of the Gospels and it may persevere an authentic tradition of an event in Jesus' life.¹¹

Leon Morris wrote forthrightly on both the problem of text even as he expressed the benefit its study:

The textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the Gospel...

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. It is thus worth our while to study it, though not as an authentic part of John's writing. This story is undoubtedly very ancient. Most authorities agree that it is referred to by Papias (AD 60-163). It is mentioned also in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (AD 375-380). But it is not mentioned very often in the early days. The reason probably is that in a day when the punishment for sexual sin was very severe among the Christians this story was thought to be too easily misinterpreted as countenancing unchastity. When ecclesiastical discipline was somewhat relaxed the story was circulated more widely and with greater measure of official sanction.

The editors of the modern Greek New Testament commented in more detail regarding this passage. Their opinions are to be highly regarded. They wrote a textual commentary of the Greek New Testament in which they explained their reasoning for every decision of every major textual variant in the New Testament.

⁹ Leon Morris, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 882ff.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 413.

¹¹ **The Reformation Study Bible** (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 1870.

They indicated that though it is highly improbable that this episode was penned by John, nevertheless, they viewed it as an authentic event during the ministry of Jesus. I attached their conclusions in an appendix to these notes in order to show how thorough these men work and think through these issues.

I appreciated the comments of one commentator that I have used in our study, **Edward Klink**. He wrote an extended assessment of how this passage should be regarded and treated by the pastor in the church. I wish that we had the time and you had the patience for me to read his entire comment, but it was a full three pages in length. I will just rehearse on paragraph of his comments.

Our response to the pericope, then, must weigh in the balance of all these issues pressing around it. We must be honest with the textual-critical evidence, which strongly denies the possibility that the pericope was original to the Gospel. At the same time, the pericope *is* in our Bibles, and the people in the pew are hardly cognizant of textual criticism and are only minimally deterred from double brackets, smaller font, or italics. The pericope has a long-standing presence in the heritage of the church which must be respected, even trusted to some degree. In our opinion, the place where this becomes most important is in the practice of the local church. The text critic can deny the text its authority, but the church cannot so freely do so—not with a thirteen-hundred-year history. It is also unfair to expect the pastor to exclude the passage from the preaching schedule when it is included in the biblical text (in both critical editions and lay versions). It seems best, therefore, to treat the text pastorally in the church the same manner as it is treated text critically in the academy: to treat its content fully and freely in a manner that matches its double bracketed or italicized nature. That is, we need not deny the significance of its content even if we have questions about its origin...¹²

We regard the passage as inspired of God along with the rest of Holy Scripture. Perhaps John did not originally pen this episode, but clearly God in His superintending providence moved scribes to cause this text to be preserved and transmitted. It is the authoritative Word of God to us, even though there is legitimate question that it came forth from the hand of the Apostle John in his original Gospel.

II. Understanding the meaning of the text itself

If there is a main idea of this passage, it perhaps was best stated this way:

Jesus is the true Judge of humanity, “the one without sin,” who receives on behalf of the world the condemnation of His own law. This is the grace and love of the gospel. The only acceptable response is to live under the gracious law of Christ, which seeks promotion of justice and the demotion of sin.¹³

We have pointed out before that we often find a structure to each pericope (episode) in a narrative such as in our Gospels. We may discern the narrative structure here. First, there is *the introduction and setting* of the episode in 7:53 through 8:2, in which the location, setting, and people who are involved in the account are identified. Secondly, in 8:3 through 6a *the conflict* is set forth, in which Jesus is at the center, the woman is brought before Him by the Jewish leaders, who were attempting to entrap Him according to the Law of Moses. The third section involves *the resolution of the conflict* in verses 8:6b-8 which is brought about by a word of Jesus and a perhaps symbolic act of writing on the ground. And then fourthly and last, in 8:9-11 we have *the conclusion and interpretation* of the episode, with its overtones of the gospel and the authority of Jesus as the Judge of sinners.

A. The introduction and setting of the episode (7:53-8:2)

¹² Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 388.

¹³ Ibid, p. 384.

We read in **John 7:53** and in **8:1** the conclusion to the previous episode in which Jesus engaged the hostile Jewish leaders in the temple.

⁵³And everyone went to his own house.

¹But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Here we read that they went their separate ways. The desires and efforts of the Jewish leaders to arrest Jesus had been thwarted once again. God had further purposes for His Son. His hour had not yet come.

It would appear that the city along with its Jewish leaders returned somewhat to normalcy after the rather heated exchange among the leaders regarding Jesus. Jesus went to “the Mount of Olives.” This is the only time this place is mentioned by name in John’s Gospel, although it is mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels on 10 different occasions. The Mount of Olives, where the Garden of Gethsemane was located, was the place where Jesus and His disciples stayed during their time in Jerusalem during the Feast of the Tabernacles.

We then read in **verse 2** the setting for the next recorded event, the woman taken in adultery brought before Jesus. “*Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them.*” This was the Day after the feast had concluded, but it is clear that the Lord Jesus had gained the people’s interest and attention. He assumed the common posture of the teacher in that day. He sat down before them and taught them. They were in a public place with a large crowd of the people present, when the woman is brought before Him. All would be watching with interest, perhaps aware of the malicious intent of those who brought this woman before Jesus. All must have been attentive to what unfolded before them.

B. The conflict is set forth (8:3-6a)

³Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, ⁴they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. ⁵Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?” ⁶This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him.

It would seem that the teaching of Jesus was interrupted by the commotion of men bringing forth this woman, whom they claimed they had caught in the very act of adultery. Interestingly, although “the Pharisees” have been mentioned a number of times in this Gospel, this is the first and only occasion “the scribes” are identified directly in the Gospel of John. Perhaps they are mentioned because they were the professional “lawyers” of the day, that is, they were skilled in knowing and deciding cases according to the Mosaic Law.

In what way were they “testing” Jesus? What were they hoping would happen? They probably anticipated one of two possibilities occurring, either of which would have served their purposes. If Jesus declared that they should go ahead and stone this woman, then He could be accused by them to the Romans, for only Rome had authority to impose execution of people within Judea. However, if Jesus told them not to stone this woman, then Jesus would be shown to condone adultery and to be in conflict with Moses and the Law of the people. This would have discredited Jesus before the people and would have given them occasion to prosecute Him before their own court. And so, even though the woman is brought forth and cast at His feet to be judged by Him, in actuality, it was Jesus who was on trial before these scribes and Pharisees to see what He would do so that they could accuse and condemn Him. It is a common ploy of the devil to claim in the name of justice to perpetrate their design and act of injustice.

The details of these men bring her to Jesus are rather suspicious. The Law of Moses declared that both the man and woman caught in adultery were to be executed. We read these passages:

“If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then both of them shall die-- the man that lay with the woman, and the woman; so you shall put away the evil from Israel.

“If a young woman who is a virgin is betrothed to a husband, and a man finds her in the city and lies with her, ²⁴then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry out in the city, and the man because he humbled his neighbor's wife; so you shall put away the evil from among you.” (Deut. 22:22-24)

“The man who commits adultery with another man's wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress, shall surely be put to death.” (Lev. 20:10)

Where was the man if she had been caught in the very act? As one stated, “The impression we get is that the woman’s accusers were not so much concerned with seeing justice was done as with putting Jesus in an embarrassing situation.”¹⁴

C. The resolution of the conflict (8:6b-8)

But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, *as though He did not hear*.

⁷So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” ⁸And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.

I placed the clause in bold italic, “*as though He did not hear*”, for this was a much later addition by a scribe to the text. It is not in the ESV or the other newer English translations. It was not original to the earlier manuscripts of this episode.

This is the only occasion in the Gospels in which we read of Jesus writing. Of course there is no indication given of the content of what He wrote. But this absence of detail has not prevented speculation of “interpreters”, who have suggested that He was writing the names of the woman’s accusers, or even identifying the sins of those present.

T. W. Manson suggested that He was imitating the action of a Roman magistrate, who wrote down his sentence and then read it out aloud. If this was so, the words which He wrote would be those which He utters in verse 7.¹⁵

There was even one scribe who inserted in his ancient copy of John the words telling of what Jesus wrote: “the sins of each one of them.”¹⁶

It is interesting that **John Calvin** saw Jesus’ action of not looking up, but looking at the ground and writing as an act that betrayed His disgust for these accusers.

“By this attitude He intended to show that He despised them... For Christ rather intended, by doing nothing, to show how unworthy they were of being heard; just as if any person, while another was speaking to him, were to draw lines on the wall, or to turn his back, or to show, by any other sign, that he was not attending to what was said. Thus in the present day, when satan attempts, by various methods, to draw us aside from the right way of teaching, we ought disdainfully to pass by many things which he holds out to us. The Papists tease us, to the utmost of their power, by many trifling cavils, as if they were throwing clouds into the air. If godly teachers be laboriously employed in examining each of those cavils, they will begin to weave Penelope’s web; and therefore delays of this sort, which do nothing but hinder the progress of the Gospel, are wisely disregarded.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Bruce, p. 414.

¹⁵ Bruce, p. 415.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 416.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol. XVII (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 319f.

In other words, Calvin was saying do not bother trying to answer all of their charges and arguments, any more than Jesus gave any true regard of the charges of these men brought against this woman.

What Jesus was writing is not important because the content is not specified. It simply suggests that the Lord Jesus allowed time for His words to pierce and convict the consciences of these men regarding their own sin, that for them to condemn her would have incurred guilt respecting themselves. What we have illustrated here was commanded by our Lord elsewhere. Matthew recorded Jesus saying, “Judge not, that you be not judged. ²For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (Matt. 7:1f).

However, we should not draw the conclusion that we should not make decisions and declarations regarding other people’s sins. We have a responsibility to do so. What Jesus was exposing and condemning was the hypocrisy and the uncharitableness of these men. But we are to point out sin and attempt to bring correction and redemption. **John Calvin** wrote of this:

He appears, therefore, to forbid all witnesses to give public testimony, and all judges to occupy the judgment-seat. I reply: this is not an absolute and unlimited prohibition, by which Christ forbids sinners in their duty in correcting the sins of others; but by this word He only reproves hypocrites, who mildly flatter themselves and their vices, but are excessively severe, and even act the part of felons, in censuring others. No man, therefore, shall be prevented by his own sins from correcting the sins of others, and even in punishing them, when it may be found necessary, provided that both in himself and in others he hate what ought to be condemned; and in addition to all this, every man ought to begin by interrogating his own conscience, and by acting both as witness and judge against himself, before he comes to others. In this manner shall we, without hating men, make war with sins.¹⁸

Jesus placed the responsibility on these accusing men to stone her. The Law of Moses stipulated that the eyewitness to the transgression of the Law was to be the first one to initiate the execution. Jesus is pressing on them their responsibility, at the same time causing them to consider their own guilt.

D. The conclusion and interpretation of the episode (8:9-11)

⁹Then those who heard it, ***being convicted by their conscience***, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. ¹⁰When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?”

¹¹She said, “No one, Lord.”

And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

Here also, I placed the clause in bold italic, “***being convicted by their conscience***”, for this also was a much later addition by a scribe to the text. It is not in the ESV or the other newer English translations. It was not original to the earlier manuscripts of this episode. This is an example of a scribe desiring to give a fuller explanation in the text that he is copying. His chief concern apparently was not to reproduce the exact words, but to convey what he thought best explained the situation, in this case, why they refused to cast stones at the woman. Sometimes there would be a scribe who was copying texts that felt it his duty to embellish or explain more fully what he was copying, thus making intentional changes in the copy of his manuscript.

The words of our Lord cut to their hearts. Beginning with the oldest first, they began to depart from Jesus and the woman. It would seem that the older a person is, the clearer and quicker he should see his own sin and what it deserves.

This woman must have thought that there was no way she was going to survive this horrible sin in which she was caught and charged. She was guilty, and she knew her just fate. But can you imagine the

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 320f.

thoughts going through her mind as she saw one by one her accusers refusing to take up stones and they began to depart from her and Jesus? Jesus said to her respectfully, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” The Law of Moses required at least two witnesses to testify before someone might be lawfully condemned and the punishment executed. Jesus exonerated her of any chargeable offense before Him: “Neither do I condemn you.” And then Jesus released her and she went away, with this exhortation: “go and sin no more.”

It does not say that this woman had faith in Jesus. It does not state that she had received salvation. She escaped punishment on this occasion of sin for which she was guilty. She was admonished to repent. Stop it! “Go and sin no more.”

Sometimes God will pass over His just judgment of even an unbeliever in this lifetime. Though he may deserve condemnation, God grants a reprieve, even of a wicked man, when it suits Him. In the Old Testament we see this experienced by wicked King Ahab of Judah. (It was in this morning’s Scripture reading if you are following the schedule of our reading chart.) God had pronounced judgment upon King Ahab through His prophet Elijah. Here is a description of Ahab and how he repented and then he received a temporary reprieve from God’s judgment.

²⁵But there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife stirred him up. ²⁶And he behaved very abominably in following idols, according to all *that* the Amorites had done, whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel.

²⁷So it was, when Ahab heard those words, that he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning.

²⁸And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ²⁹“See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days. In the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house.” (1 Kings 21:25-29)

And on this occasion, this woman escaped her just condemnation, receiving the admonition from Jesus, “Go and sin no more.”

III. A few conclusions and their implication

1. Here we learn the power and the benefit of our conscience that the Lord has given to each one of us. Our conscience is not an infallible guide, but it is a guide, unless and until it becomes defiled and reshaped due to customary sinful practice and corrupt values embraced. Here are the words of **J. C. Ryle** (1816-1900) on this matter:

We learn, for one thing, *the power of conscience*. We read of the woman’s accusers, that when they heard our Lord’s appeal, “being convicted by their own conscience, they went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last.” Wicked and hardened as they were, they felt something within which made them cowards. Fallen as human nature is, God has taken care to leave within every man a witness that will be heard.

Conscience is a most important part of our inward man, and plays a most important part in our spiritual history. It cannot save us. It never yet led any one to Christ. It is blind, and liable to be misled. It is lame and powerless, and cannot guide us to heaven. Yet conscience is not to be despised. It is the minister’s best friend, when he stands up to rebuke sin from the pulpit. It is the mother’s best friend, when she tries to restrain her children from evil and quicken them to good. It is the teacher’s best friend, when he presses home on boys and girls their moral duties. Happy is he who never stifles his conscience, but strives to keep it tender! Still happier is he who prays to have it enlightened by the Holy Ghost, and sprinkled with Christ’s blood.¹⁹

¹⁹ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 2 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 71f.

2. There will be a day when each of us are brought before King Jesus in judgment, perhaps being escorted before His throne by angels. The charges may be made clear to us and there we will stand without excuse. But because Jesus Christ is our Judge and because He is our Savior, we who believe on Him will hear words perhaps similar to what this woman heard from Him, "Where are your accusers? Neither do I condemn you. Enter into the joy of your Lord." The promise of the gospel and the present assurance that we have through faith in Christ is that "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). He will be just when He passes sentence upon us that we are not only not guilty, but that we are righteous before Him. This is because for all our sins He will have suffered and died, and He will present every true believer before Himself clothed in the garment of righteousness that He Himself fashioned for us and then placed upon us when we believed on Him as our Lord and Savior.

Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God,
be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17)

Appendix

Comments of Textual Editors of the Greek New Testament on the authenticity of the passage of John 7:53 through 8:11.²⁰

On behalf of the Editorial Committee of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, Bruce Metzger wrote the following:

The evidence for the non-Johanine origin of the pericope of the adulteress is overwhelming. It is absent from such early and diverse manuscripts as p^{66,75} Ⲁ B L N T W X Y Δ Θ Ψ 0141 0211 22 33 124 157 209 788 828 1230 1241 1242 1253 2193 *al.* Codices A and C are defective in this part of John, but it is highly probable that neither contained the pericope, for careful measurement discloses that there would not have been space enough on the missing leaves to include the section along with the rest of the text. In the East the passage is absent from the oldest form of the Syriac version, as well as from the Sahidic and the sub-Achmimic versions and the older Boharic manuscripts. Some Armenian manuscripts and the older Georgian version omit it. In the west the passage is absent from the Gothic version and from several Old Latin manuscripts. No Greek Church Fathers prior to Euthymius Zigabenus (12th c.) comments on the passage, and Euthymius declares that the accurate copies of the Gospel do not contain it.

When one adds to this impressive and diversified list the external evidence the consideration that the style and vocabulary of the pericope differ noticeably from the rest of the Fourth Gospel (see any critical commentary), and that it interrupts the sequence of 7:52 and 8:12ff., the case against its being Johanine authorship seems conclusive.

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. Most copyists apparently thought that it would interrupt John's narrative least if it were inserted farther John 7:52 (D E G H K M U II 28 700 892 *al.*). Others placed it after 7:36 (ms. 225) or after 7:44 (several Georgian mss.) or after 21:25 (1 565 1076 1570 1582 arm^{mss}) or after Luke 21:38 (*f*¹³). Significantly enough, in many of the witnesses which contain the passage it is marked with asterisks or obeli, indicating that, though the scribes included the account, they were aware that it lacked satisfactory credentials.

Sometimes it is stated that the pericope was deliberately expunged from the Fourth Gospel (by a scribe) because it was liable to be understood in a sense too indulgent to adultery. But, apart from the absence of any instance elsewhere of a scribal excision of an extensive passage because of moral prudence, this theory fails "to explain why the three preliminary verses (7:53-8:2), so important as apparently descriptive of the time and place at which all the discourses of chapter 8 were spoken, should have been omitted with the rest" (Hort, "Notes on Select Readings," pp. 86f.).

Although the committee was unanimous that the pericope was originally no part of the Fourth Gospel, in deference to the evident antiquity of the passage, a majority decided to print it, enclosed within double square brackets, at its traditional place following John 7:52.

Inasmuch as the passage is absent from the earlier and better manuscripts which normally serve to identify types of texts, it is not always easy to make a decision among alternative readings. In any case it will be understood that the levels of certainty ({A}, {B}) are within the framework of initial decision relating the passage as a whole. (In other words, the committee was thoroughly convinced that the passage should be included because it was an authentic event in the ministry of our Lord.)

²⁰ Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament; A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (United Bible Society, 1971), pp. 219-222.