

A Questionable Text

John 7:53-8:11

Pastor Russ Kennedy

I want you to come with me on vacation.

Driving is music and quiet time to think...

Driving out to Oregon Coast (shared) and back home (mostly me)...

This text occupied a lot of thinking time...

Why?

Look down at your Bibles. Please, all of you. What do you see about the text in front of you this morning?

ESV	[[]] around text	<i>The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53-8:11.</i> Footnote: Some manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11; others add the passage here or after 7:36 or after 21:25 or after Luke 21:38, with variations in the text
NASB	[] around text	Margin note: <i>John 7:53-8:11 is not found in most of the old[est] manuscripts</i>
KJV	No indication	The Greek manuscript used for translating has this passage in it but has a margin reference questioning its validity.
NKJV	[] around text	MacArthur Study Bible (NKJV) notes that it is present in 900 manuscripts while providing a long footnote explaining why it is most likely not a part of our Bibles. We will talk about those briefly in a few minutes.
NIV	Different publishers use different methods to set the passage off from the text around it	<i>The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11</i>
NLT	Header before text	<i>The most ancient Greek manuscripts do not include John 7:53–8:11.</i>

The Kiswahili translation, both standard Chinese translations, both standard French translations, several of the Spanish translations, both the Luther and Ebefelder in German, the standard and modern Dutch translations to name a few all flag this passage as possibly not being a part of original text.

Should this bother us? What do we do when we have texts like this in front of us that the scholars who translate and comment on our Bibles have serious doubts about the authenticity of this text?

The Translators and their Bibles

First, let's consider how we get our Bibles.

The Original Texts

The Bible was written primarily in three languages, most of it in Hebrew in the Old Testament with some in Aramaic. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek. The Jewish Levites and scribes were very careful to compile, copy and conserve Hebrew manuscripts. Even down to our day, the differences between manuscripts is very small and affects no doctrine at all.

The New Testament is a bit more difficult. We have thousands of copies of fragments of the New Testament books. Once the canon was completed and the church accepted the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God, work began to take the pieces and make a whole. This involved much hard work over a very long period on the part of many language and Bible scholars to compile, compare and establish as close as possible what the original manuscript would have been as written by the inspired author.

Two general families of manuscripts have emerged and are available to translators. One was completed by Erasmus, the Roman Catholic scholar during the 1500's. It relied on a large body of manuscripts and, by Erasmus' own admission, edited to align with his Latin translation. He also questioned the authenticity of this text in John yet placed it in the main body of the Greek with marginal notes. It was the first complete Greek manuscript to be officially printed. A version of this manuscript was used as the basis for the translation of the King James Bible.

Up until that time, the texts were passed on by men (usually priests) who were trained and largely served as copyists. They took the manuscript they had and duplicated it by hand. They did so in either all capital Greek letters or all small Greek letters. Their hard and careful work gave us the largest body of manuscripts of any other ancient document. By contrast, there are only 20 copies of *The Roman History* written by Livy around the time of Jesus.

In the 1800's a new effort was launched to take all the new manuscripts that had been discovered since Erasmus did his work and produce a more accurate text. They took all the oldest manuscripts and the most numerous they had and produced a very accurate text. Today, there are 5,686 Greek manuscripts and they are 99.5% consistent. This manuscript is the basis for the translation of almost all modern translations, not just in English, but in most languages.

Now, let me pause to point out something lest you lose confidence in your Bibles. The differences between the manuscripts are very small given how old they are and how many they are. None of these differences affect a doctrine – meaning, either a doctrine would not be in the Bible or a doctrine in the Bible would be different than what we have.

Our Clearcreek Chapel Book of Faith and Order states, “All Scripture was given by inspiration by God; that is, it is God-breathed as holy men of old wrote, being borne along by the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures are infallible and inerrant *in the original writings* and are the final arbiter in all disputes.” In other words, we recognize two essential ideas. (1) The original manuscripts are what were inspired and inerrant. (2) We have reliable, trustworthy copies and we have many reliable and trustworthy translations in the English (as well as most written languages in the world.)

The result is that we affirm when we hold up our Bibles (even if they are different translations) that this is the Word of God. Upon that I stake my salvation, my practice and my preaching.

The Challenge for Translators

Now, this brings me to the challenge of this text (and remember, there are two other major problematic texts in our New Testaments: Mark 16:9-19 and 1 John 5:7). Why have almost all translations flagged this text as not being authentic? John Piper summarized the reasons quite well for us in a sermon on March 6, 2011 entitled *Neither Do I Condemn You*: (Following emphasis mine)

1. The story is missing from **all** the Greek manuscripts of John before the fifth century.
2. **All** the earliest church fathers omit this passage in commenting on John and pass directly from John 7:52 to John 8:12.
3. In fact, the text flows very nicely from 7:52 to 8:12 if you leave out the story and just read the passage as though the story were not there.
4. **No** Eastern church father cites the passage before the tenth century when dealing with this Gospel.
5. When the story starts to appear in manuscript copies of the Gospel of John, it shows up in **three different places** other than here (after 7:36; 7:44; and 21:25), and in one manuscript of Luke, it shows up after 21:38.
6. Its style and vocabulary is more unlike the rest of John's Gospel than any other paragraph in the Gospel.

Some of the greatest New Testament scholars alive today all affirm that it is unlikely that these verses are part of the inspired Word of God. This would include D.A. Carson, Bruce Metzger, Leon Morris, Andreas Kostenberger and Herman Ribberdos. Carson notes that almost the lone dissenter is Zane Hodges of Dallas Seminary.

So, what are you to do? Does this mean you cannot trust your Bible anymore? Absolutely not. Just the opposite – we should rejoice that God has not only given us so many manuscripts, but also such wise people who have given us the Word of God in our own languages. Again, as Dr. Piper said so well, “...you can be thankful that God has, in his sovereign providence over the transmission process for 2,000 years, ordered things so that the few uncertainties that remain alter no doctrine of the Christian faith. That is really astonishing when you think about it, and we should worship God because of it.”

The Expositor and His Bible

As an expositor, as someone who generally preaches through the Bible paragraph by paragraph then I have to decide what I am going to do.

I have several commentaries on the gospel of John. None of them accept this text as being Scripture. Most of them think the story happened but have no proof of that. Yet most of them explain what is here. That troubles me.

I have read several sermons on this text some of which skip over the problem entirely and others explain the problem and then preach the text. That troubles me.

I have talked this over with the Elders this week seeking their counsel and input in this hard decision. I was much helped and encouraged by their care and counsel.

My responsibility is to preach the Word of God. I take this responsibility so seriously that I am deeply disturbed by this text. I am not disturbed by trying to omit it. I am deeply disturbed about adding it to the Word of God when it is unlikely that it is the Word of God.

Revelation 22:18-19, speaking primarily of the Book of Revelation, but by extension of the whole Bible, warns us in these words:

¹⁸ I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

Now listen carefully to me.

It is wrong to take away the Word of God.

That is why for some this is difficult. These verses have been in Bible stories, Sunday School lessons and so on. It feels like something in the Bible is being cut out. So there is a deep visceral reaction. And I commend it as the right reaction *when that is what is happening*. And O that we would have the same reaction when interpreting and applying the Word of God has the effect of taking it away – of treating a text in such a way that what it teaches or what it requires is not there.

It is wrong to add to the Word of God.

I hope that you will have a strong, visceral reaction to someone trying to add to the Bible. It is wrong to put these verses in the Bible if they do not belong there. It is just as wrong. It is just as dangerous. And, we should also have strong reactions to the Bible being handled in such a way as to add what is not there.

So, I can stand this morning with whole Bible and a clear conscience. I have not taken away what is supposed to be there nor have I added what is not supposed to be there. I so honor the Word of God and the preaching of it that we will pick up with the Word of God in John 8:13, next week.

The Christian and his Bible

But let me say this: Christians love their Bibles. At the center of Christians' lives are their Bibles.

Through the Bible, we came to be born again.

The Word of God in our ears and eyes carries the Spirit into our hearts so that we receive eternal life, are raised from spiritual deadness and sustain the new life of the soul. The Bible is our bread and water whereby we feast and drink from Christ.

Through the Bible, we come to know and to love God.

Our Bibles are the only God given, unfailing, without error place where God is speaking authoritatively. It is through our Bibles that we hear God and know how to speak to Him. The Bible opens up to our eyes of faith a vision of God that our affections go out to in faith that works by love.

Through the Bible, we grow in our relationship with other believers.

The Bible pours out into our hearts the love of the Holy Spirit so that we will love others and particularly will love our brothers and sisters. Speaking truth to one another is how enabling and edifying grace is actually shared among believers. The Bible guides and guards our relationships as believers as we live their truths out in all spheres of life.

Through the Bible, we build gathered communities of believers in churches.

The Bible tells us that we must form gathered assemblies. It tells us who is qualified to lead them, to serve in them and what they must do to be what God has designed His people to be. The Bible tells us how we are an outpost of heaven here on earth, a pillar of truth, the launching place for the gospel to neighborhoods and nations. The Bible is how we know that we are

a Temple, a Kingdom, a Priesthood, a nation, the new humanity – all of this swells up in a grand “Yes” in our souls.

Through the Bible, we live lives pleasing to the Lord.

It is all we need to give us the promises of God and power of God for a life pleasing to God. It directs us into holiness and defends us from sin. It gives us the precepts, the principles and the patterns to live by. God so ordered the events and the recording of its history so that we will have examples and instruction regarding Christ and the Christian life.

Through the Bible, we know how to serve God and one another in ministry.

In it are the truths, teachings, templates and trajectories for what Christian serving truly is. We search it often and regularly so as to conform our service and serving to it.

So we read our Bibles. We study our Bibles. We treasure them. We defend them against attacks and misuse. And because we love our Bibles we will not take away from them. Because we love our bibles, we will not add to them.

Let me close and bring our hearts to worship God through a Psalm¹¹ that celebrates the Word of God.

² Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, ³ who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways! ⁴ You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. ⁵ Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!

⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. ¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! ¹¹ I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. ¹² Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes! ¹³ With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. ¹⁴ In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. ¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. ¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

¹⁷ Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word. ¹⁸ Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.

⁴¹ Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise; ⁴² then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word. ⁴³ And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for my hope is in your rules. ⁴⁴ I will keep your law continually, forever and ever, ⁴⁵ and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts. ⁴⁶ I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame, ⁴⁷ for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love. ⁴⁸ I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.

⁸¹ My soul longs for your salvation; I hope in your word. ¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

¹⁶⁶ I hope for your salvation, O LORD, and I do your commandments. ¹⁶⁷ My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly. ¹⁶⁸ I keep your precepts and testimonies, for all my ways are before you.

O Lord, how we love these ancient words, holy words, words of your love and grace.

Appendix

To help those inquiring...

There are presently 5,686 Greek manuscripts in existence today for the New Testament.¹ If we were to compare the number of New Testament manuscripts to other ancient writings, we find that the New Testament manuscripts far outweigh the others in quantity.²

Author	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Approximate Time Span between original & copy	Number of Copies	Accuracy of Copies
Lucretius	died 55 or 53 B.C.		1100 yrs	2	----
Pliny	61-113 A.D.	850 A.D.	750 yrs	7	----
Plato	427-347 B.C.	900 A.D.	1200 yrs	7	----
Demosthenes	4th Cent. B.C.	1100 A.D.	800 yrs	8	----
Herodotus	480-425 B.C.	900 A.D.	1300 yrs	8	----
Suetonius	75-160 A.D.	950 A.D.	800 yrs	8	----
Thucydides	460-400 B.C.	900 A.D.	1300 yrs	8	----
Euripides	480-406 B.C.	1100 A.D.	1300 yrs	9	----
Aristophanes	450-385 B.C.	900 A.D.	1200	10	----
Caesar	100-44 B.C.	900 A.D.	1000	10	----
Livy	59 BC-AD 17	----	???	20	----
Tacitus	circa 100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1000 yrs	20	----
Aristotle	384-322 B.C.	1100 A.D.	1400	49	----
Sophocles	496-406 B.C.	1000 A.D.	1400 yrs	193	----
Homer (Iliad)	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 yrs	643	95%
New Testament	1st Cent. A.D. (50-100 A.D.)	2nd Cent. A.D. (c. 130 A.D. f.)	less than 100 years	5600	99.5%

As you can see, there are thousands more New Testament Greek manuscripts than any other ancient writing. The internal consistency of the New Testament documents is about 99.5% textually pure. That is an amazing accuracy. In addition there are over 19,000 copies in the Syriac, Latin, Coptic, and Aramaic languages. The total supporting New Testament manuscript base is over 24,000.

Notes

¹¹ Psalm 119:2-5, 9-18, 41-48, 81, 105 166-168 (ESV)