

## **Examining the Authenticity of John 7:53 - 8:12 and its Significance**

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### Introduction

Among the four gospels, John's gospel is different and probably the most powerful. Introducing this gospel, the English Standard Version (ESV) 2016 Text Edition notes, "no other single document has influenced the world as widely and deeply as the Gospel of John" (p. v). From earliest days this text was called a "Gospel," meaning, "good news". So many things make the gospel different from the rest: literary structure, theology, contents, and so forth. It is believed to have been written around the nineties A.D. (Keener, 2012). Though over the years, scholars have argued on the authorship of the gospel, there are convincing proves to show that the gospel was written by "the beloved disciple" who is often identified as John the Apostle (Morris, 1995; McCain, 2008). Keener (2012) notes that for some, the narrator is to be distinguished from the Beloved Disciple. However, comparing the internal elements of Johannine literature (1, 2, & 3 John and Revelation), it is safer to admit the idea of the author been someone named John.

John's Gospel is believed to have been written at the request of those who were intimate with the Apostle and who had already heard from his lips the teachings they desired to see recorded for the perpetual guidance of the church. Many believe that this gospel was written when the Apostle's fellow-disciples and Bishops urgently pressed him to write. He wrote the gospel when there were many heretic teachings spreading across the then world. Thus, the Gospel of John was written

to meet the spiritual needs of a church that probably had little understanding or background of the Old Testament. This church may have been endangered by the heretic teachings of the Cerinthianists, Ebionists, Gnostics and many others. The total thesis or purpose of this gospel is for the audiences to believe in the Only Begotten Son of God who came (proceeded) from the Father and in believing have eternal life (20:31).

There has been a varied consideration for the place of the composition such as Alexandria, Antioch or Syria, and Ephesus. Among them, Ephesus is most favorable by the scholars. Raymond (2008) suggests that since Revelation have similar items of polemics of anti-synagogue with John, then, the Ephesus tradition is plausible. Robertson (1985) corroborates the above view. He rejected the idea of Papias' work which brings two John, one is the apostle, and the other is the elder. Hence, for Robertson, there is only one John in the Ephesus, and he was too an eye-witness for the Lord.

Often, John's Gospel is called "The spiritual gospel" partly because it focuses on the divinity or Deity of Christ. Unlike the other gospel, John does not give the human ancestry of Christ but starts by proving that He, Christ, is the Logos that became flesh and dwelt among them in bodily form. As already stated, John wrote this Gospel to confront the Gnostics of his time. Commenting on Gnosticism, Lumanze (2022) remarks:

Gnosticism was a heretic teaching that refuted the Divinity of Christ. They believed and taught that matter is evil and so God could not have incarnated in the person of Christ. How could God become human (a material being)? -they questioned. The apostle John the Beloved cleverly attacked this heresy both in his gospel and epistles. He started his gospel by telling his audience that the Logos was in the beginning with God and is God Himself...who later became human (1:1ff). The Gnostics taught that since matter is evil, Christ

would never have been contaminated by the material world, which was essentially evil. This meant that Christ did not really become flesh (p. 116).

Hence, there are various statements about the divinity of Christ, so as to correct both of present and of future heresies (Wiles, 1980). This study seeks to critically examine the authenticity of the story of the adulterous woman in order to determine its veracity and then look at the significance of the story. The study adopted the historical and analytical approaches.

### **Genre of John 8:1-12**

The text under study, John 8:1-11, falls within the genre of the Gospels. According to Krejcir (2006), the four gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John) contain a bit of all the literary types with the primary purpose of expressing faith in Christ and what He has done on our behalf. In these works, the stories are not necessarily in chronological or sequential order, except for Luke.

### **The Authenticity of John 8:1-12**

This account or passage is often referred to as *Pericopae adulterai* (the adulterous section) by most Bible scholars. It is a narrative within a narrative. Keith (2009) argues that the pericope presents Jesus as a person who can write and at the same time a person who knows the law. The text has been treated in a variety of ways in English translations of the New Testament. Some Bible translations such as the KJV translate or print it as part of the whole text; while other translations like the NASB have the passage printed in parenthesis. The NIV draws a horizontal line at the top and bottom of the section. Other versions such as the RSV have it printed either in the margin or at the end of the gospel. According to Ngewa (2003), all these translations clearly “demonstrate that there is

no unanimity among Bible scholars concerning the authenticity of this portion". According to him, similar differences are found in the Greek New Testaments. The fourth fifth century editions of the UBS include this section in bracket. The Textus Receptus and the Latin Vulgate treat the passage as having the same status as the passage around it. (p. 146).

Over the years, scholars generally agree that the story of the woman caught in adultery was not originally part of the Gospel of John, but also believe that the story is truly an ancient one with earmarks of an authentic incident from Jesus' life" (Gench, 2009, p. 398.).According to Baum (2014), the pericope's textual originality is defended among others by Burgon (1896), Hodges (1979) and Baum (2014). Also commenting on this passage, Lenski (1942) remarks:

John 7:53-8:11 is not an integral part of John's gospel but part of the early oral tradition (antedating AD 70); it was very early put into writing form, and one of its two versions was eventually inserted into John's gospel...Between 7: 52 and 8:12, nothing intervenes. The spurious section is foreign to John's gospel; it fits nowhere into the plan of this gospel, and is easily recognized as an interpolation in the place which it occupies. The language differs decidedly from that of John's own writing. Yet this spurious section reports quite correctly an actual occurrence in the life of Jesus. Every feature of it bears the stamp of probability; although we are unable to say at what point in the story of Jesus it should be inserted (p. 594).

From the above observations of Lenski, it becomes obvious that even though this passage might not have been in the original manuscripts it is still authentic. Corroborating the above view, Fredrikson (1985) observes that:

It is almost certain that the account was not written by the Apostle John. For neither the language nor the style of writing are his. Yet, this account has shown up in the inspired record in a variety of places; most recently and permanently in this gospel, and it is a lovely witness to Jesus' caring love for one lonely, frightened sinner. The details in the story are so unusual that it is highly unlikely it could have been fabricated, as some have claimed (p. 153).

Based on the above assertion of Fredrikson, it becomes evident and certain as Westcott asserts that this passage of the Scripture is beyond doubt an authentic fragment of Apostolic Traditions. From all indications, the passage was a real-life encounter that Jesus had with the teachers of law and the Pharisees during His earthly ministry. Nevertheless, how it came to be inserted into the John's gospel, we do not know. However, for the sake of clarity and emphasis, we must in discussing the authenticity of this passage according to Ngewa (2003), note the following points:

First, this passage is not found in some of the earliest manuscripts containing the gospel of John. Key early manuscripts like the Codices Sinaiticus of the 4th century AD., and Vaticanus, Papyri 66 (of ca. 200) and 75 (of early 3rd century AD) among others, do not contain this passage. This story is not found in most crucial manuscripts. The weightiest manuscript that has the section is Bezae Cantabrigiensis of the 6th century AD. Second, some of the early Church Fathers like Jerome (in the Vulgate), Ambrose, Bede, Augustine and Gregory the Great and many others mentioned this passage as part of the gospel of John in their writings; and others did not as well. For example, concerning this section or passage, Augustine says:

The Jews, it says, brought a woman, possibly a prostitute, to the Lord, to test Him, and they said, "Master, this woman has just now been caught in adultery. In the Law of Moses, it is written that any

woman caught in adultery should be stoned. What do you say?"...So the Jews said to themselves, "If He says 'let her be stoned, we shall say to Him, what has become of your forgiving sin? Aren't you the one who says, "Your sins are forgiving you? "But if He says 'let her go', we shall say, "What has become of your coming to fulfill the Law and not to destroy it?" (SERMON 16 A. 4. As Quoted in Elowsky, 2006, p. 273).

From the above sermon of Augustine, we can confidently say that this encounter was a real one and not fiction. For St. Augustine to have boldly preached from this passage authenticates it.

Examining this passage, Ngewa (2003) raises the questions that the student thinks beg for a firm answer: Was this passage in the original manuscripts and then left out in the earliest manuscripts that we have, or was it not in the original manuscripts but was inserted later on? Responding to these questions, Ngewa (2003) explains that those scholars who argue for the former position point out that the early manuscripts could have omitted the passage because Jesus might be seen as condoning adultery if it was inserted. Thus, the early church probably had intentionally removed the passage because it was tantamount to portraying Christ as one who condones evil. The early manuscripts therefore could have left it out simply because of the risk involved; and when the risk was no longer great, the section was inserted again. Those who view this section as a later insertion are drawn to this position, by the late dating of the manuscripts that contain it. They believe that its value at the later date would be to teach the church how to treat a sinner who offends (p. 146-147- emphasis mine).

Be that as it may, it is obvious from the passage that the target of the Pharisees was neither the woman nor the man (he was not needed for their purpose), it was Christ. He was

the one they wanted to trap. The woman alone was sufficient to accomplish this task and that's why they didn't bother bringing the man along. The law according to Leviticus 20: 10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-24 was very clear. And Jesus had only two options which were: "Stone her or not stone her". If He had approved the stoning, then He would have rubbished His entire message of Love, Mercy and Forgiveness. He would have also exceeded the legal powers given to Jews by the Romans. According to John 18: 31, the Jews did not have the authority to pass capital judgment on anybody. On the other hand, if Jesus had said, "Let her go"-then He would be seen as one who condones sin and immorality. The Pharisees and the Rabbis knowing the implications of both stands and thought within themselves that they could box Jesus into a corner and trap Him. The reverse was the case anyway.

### **Significance of John 8:1-12**

First, the text shows that our Lord Jesus Christ was in the world to redeem sinners and not to condemn them (John 3:17). His mission and passion were to save the adulterous woman and accordingly, He commanded her to "go, and sin no more".

Second, Jesus' approach to the woman's sin was in conformity with His mission or purpose on earth. Thus, He wanted the woman to experience and lives a new life in Him; and not to die in her sin. In the Law, people are to die for their sins; but in Christ Jesus, our sins are forgiven, and we live in Him.

Third, the passage accentuates that no human is without sin-and the Pharisees learnt this lesson that day. This is of course the truth of 1John 1: 10. If not the death of Christ (His Vicarious death on the Cross), no one can stand before God's presence for we have all sinned and fallen short of His glory. Thus, we should not be too quick to judge others.

Lastly, the text reveal Jesus as an example of Mercy- He is a merciful Teacher. He is one who is totally holy but fully understanding when a sinner falls. This passage thus illustrates Christ's attitude towards sinners.

## **Conclusion**

This study has established the fact that though the text under study, John 8:1-12 may not have originally been part of the materials contained in John's Gospel; however, from all indications, the story was a real one. Moreover, Jesus' approach to the matter shows how wise and compassionate He is. He did not condemn the woman caught in adultery and He did not also encourage such act. This shows that every sinful act, including adultery should be discouraged. For the contemporary Nigerian church, this also poses a challenge for the church to rise up and speak against moral sins, injustice, and oppression of the weak. The text also has shown that God's forgiveness is always available. Hence, we are not be judgmental-mercy triumphs over judgment. Christians are called to help those who are weak and feeble to become strong and vibrant in the Lord.

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