Ad Fontes, Week Seven: The Woman Caught in Adultery

Chapter 6: The Pericope Adulterae

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

Taught by **Larry Herzog Jr.** · Fall 2026

Week Seven

This week's case is the reverse of last week's. On the evidence, John 7:53 to 8:11 is an easier call than Mark 16: the story is missing from every Greek copy of John before about AD 400. It has serious defenders, but they are a small minority. Pastorally it may be harder. The story is so like Jesus that many careful scholars think it may be a true memory of him, one that simply did not begin in John's Gospel. Today we hold both halves together.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 10	Report back: what your Bible does with John 8
10 to 18	A passage with no fixed home
18 to 30	External evidence
30 to 40	Internal evidence: read it both ways
40 to 46	The master question
46 to 56	Where did the story come from?
56 to 66	What this does not take away
66 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: what your Bible does with John 8

Last week you wrote down how your translation handles John 7:53 to 8:11. Compare with what you found at Mark 16.

- Brackets? A line or heading? A note saying the earliest manuscripts do not include it?
- Does your Bible mention that some manuscripts put it somewhere else?
- Was it treated the same way as Mark 16:9 to 20, or differently?

The term scholars use is *pericope adulterae*, Latin for "the passage about the adulterous woman." Here is the story in brief: scribes and Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery to Jesus to test him with the law of Moses. He writes on the ground and says, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her" (John 8:7 BSB). The accusers leave one by one, oldest first. Jesus tells the woman he does not condemn her either, and to go and sin no more.

2. A passage with no fixed home

A striking fact about this story: in the manuscripts that have it, it does not stay put.

Where it appears	In which manuscripts
After John 7:52 (its familiar place)	Codex Bezae, most late Greek manuscripts, the Latin Vulgate, the Textus Receptus
After John 7:36	Two medieval Greek manuscripts (225 and 1128)
After John 7:44	Three Georgian manuscripts
After John 8:12, with 8:12 repeated	A handful of medieval Greek manuscripts
After John 21:25, the end of the Gospel	Family 1, a group of related medieval Greek manuscripts, and some twenty others
After Luke 21:38, in a different Gospel	Family 13, another related group, often called the Ferrar group after the scholar who first identified it
At the end of Luke	One medieval Greek manuscript (1333)

Seven homes in two Gospels. For a long time this wandering was treated as the clinching evidence, and you will still read that. It carries less weight than it seems. Every relocation turns up in manuscripts of the 900s or later, and defenders of the passage have shown that most of them follow the church's reading calendar: the Pentecost reading skipped from 7:52 to 8:12, and 8:3 to 11 was read on its own for the feast of Saint Pelagia on October 8. A copyist making a Gospel book easier to read aloud had reason to move it. Other passages were moved for similar reasons; the doxology at the end of Romans turns up in several places.

Last week, four endings of Mark told us the original ending was felt to be missing. This week the wandering is real but late. What it cannot explain is the story's absence from every early copy of John. That absence, not the wandering, is the heart of the case.

3. External evidence

The picture here is far more one-sided than Mark 16.

Lack the story	Have the story
P66 (about AD 200) and **P75** (late 100s or early 200s): both run straight from 7:52 to 8:12	**Codex Bezae** (about 400), the first Greek manuscript to include it, and a manuscript that often expands its text
Codex Sinaiticus and **Codex Vaticanus** (300s)	Some Old Latin manuscripts, and Jerome's Vulgate
Codex Alexandrinus and **Codex Ephraemi** (400s). The pages are missing here, but the space on the lost leaves is too small to have held it	Later Peshitta Syriac manuscripts
Codex Washingtonianus (about 400) and **Borgianus** (400s); later, **Regius** (700s) and **Delta** (800s), which leave a blank space after 7:52, as if their scribes knew of copies that had it	Most Greek manuscripts from the Middle Ages on: about 1,500 contain it and about 270 lack it
The earliest Syriac, Coptic, Georgian, and Armenian translations	

The church fathers

- **Silent in the Greek commentaries on John.** Origen's commentary on John survives only in part, and the books on these chapters are lost, but wherever he quotes the surrounding verses he passes from 7:52 to 8:12. Chrysostom preached through John in the late 300s without it. Cyril of Alexandria and Theodore of Mopsuestia skip it. No Greek commentator treats it until the 1100s.
- **Silent where you would most expect it.** Around AD 210 Tertullian wrote a whole treatise on adultery and forgiveness and never cites it.
- **Known in the West by the late 300s.** Pacian of Barcelona and Ambrose of Milan both cite it, Ambrose calling it "very famous." Jerome puts it in the Vulgate and says he found it in many Greek and Latin copies. Augustine, in the early 400s, suggests some men removed it from their copies for fear it would excuse their wives' adultery.

One more thing worth knowing: a story of Jesus and a woman accused of sin was circulating before any Greek copy of John that we have included it. An early church order, the *Didascalia* (200s), retells it, and the Alexandrian teacher Didymus the Blind (300s) says he found it "in certain gospels." Eusebius reports that Papias told a similar story found in the Gospel according to the Hebrews. None of them says it came from John. We will come back to this in section 6.

The UBS editors rate the omission an A, and the sixth edition (2025) keeps that rating.

4. Internal evidence: read it both ways

Try it first. One person reads John 7:45 to 52 aloud and goes straight on to 8:12, skipping the story. Then read it again with 7:53 to 8:11 in place. Which reading flows?

What John tends to write

- **The words are not John's.** "Scribes" (8:3) is common in Matthew, Mark, and Luke but appears nowhere else in John. The Mount of Olives (8:1) is named often by Luke, never elsewhere by John. "Early in the morning" (8:2) uses a word John does not use. The rhythm reads more like Luke.
- **The setting breaks.** John 7 and 8 take place at the Feast of Tabernacles. Chapter 7 ends with the leaders dismissing the idea of a prophet from Galilee. At 8:12 Jesus speaks again to the people at the same feast: "I am the light of the world" (BSB), very likely spoken against the great lamps lit in the temple during that feast. The story drops in a night away, a new morning, a new cast, and then snaps back to the feast as if nothing happened.
- **The other side.** Defenders answer that John elsewhere has clusters of words he uses only once; that the aside in 8:6, "They said this to test Him" (BSB), sounds like John 6:6; and that the command at 8:11 echoes John 5:14. They add that 7:45 to 52 is a closed meeting of the leaders, so 8:12 does not join it seamlessly either, and that "Then each went to his own home" (7:53 BSB) is no way to begin a freestanding story. Those are fair points. They do not overcome the run of non-Johannine words, and on balance the flow still favors the absence.

What copyists tended to do

About a hundred manuscripts mark the whole passage with asterisks or obeli, which may signal doubt. About 130 more mark only 8:3 to 11, the portion read on Saint Pelagia's day, and those marks are best taken as reading instructions. A few manuscripts add notes: some say the passage is missing from many copies, others that it is present in the ancient ones. The copyists knew the passage was disputed, but they did not agree about it.

Words and setting point the same way, and the copyists' marks fit that picture without settling it.

5. The master question

Suppose John did not write it	Suppose John did write it
Can we explain how it got in? Yes, easily. A treasured story about Jesus was circulating in the church. Copyists who loved it found it a place after John 7:52, where the temple setting made it feel at home. By the late 300s it stood there in Latin and Greek copies. The other spots turn up only much later, mostly following the reading calendar.	Can we explain its absence from P66, P75, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, the early translations, and the Greek commentators? Not easily. No repeated words invite an eye-skip. Defenders propose a single early accident in Egypt (see below), but it has to carry a great deal.

The verdict is clear. With very high confidence, John 7:53 to 8:11 was not part of the Gospel John wrote.

Augustine's explanation, and the one defended today

Augustine thought the passage was original and that some nervous husbands had cut it. He deserves a fair hearing, and he reasoned from the evidence he had. His view joins two claims. The first, that the passage is John's, still has serious defenders. The second, that husbands cut it, is held by almost no one today, the passage's modern defenders included:

1. Cutting it would have had to happen everywhere at once: in Egypt, Syria, and the Greek East, in separate communities that never compared notes.
2. A suppressed passage would be either present or absent. It would not turn up in seven different places.
3. Origen and Chrysostom were not hiding the story. It simply was not in their copies of John.

The main position defended today, by Maurice Robinson (whose collation of this passage across the Greek manuscripts is the most thorough ever made) and James Snapp (*Jesus and the Adulteress*), keeps Augustine's first claim and drops the second. They propose a single early accident: a copyist in second-century Egypt, working from a reader's copy marked to skip these verses on Pentecost, took the marks as meant for him and left the passage out, and his copy shaped much of what followed. It is an ingenious proposal, and it deserves to be named as such. But it needs a Pentecost reading fixed and marked in Egypt more than a century before we have any evidence for one, and it needs that one copy to explain the passage's absence from the Syriac, Coptic, Gothic, and Armenian translations and from the Greek commentators of the whole East. The simpler account is still that the story was not in John to begin with.

6. Where did the story come from?

If John did not write it, was it simply made up? Not necessarily. Careful scholars such as D. A. Carson accept fully that John did not write these verses, yet hold open that the story is a genuine memory of Jesus that circulated in the church and was later given a home in John. Chris Keith, Jennifer Knust, and Tommy Wasserman, who all hold the passage was added to John, have argued that it should still be preached.

Why that is a real possibility

- **It was known early, outside John.** Section 3's hints (the *Didascalia* in the 200s, Didymus's "certain gospels," Papias's story) show the story had a life of its own before it was fixed in John's text.
- **Its mercy matches the Jesus we know.** He calls Levi from the tax booth, eats with sinners, defends the woman who anointed his feet (Luke 7), and tells of the prodigal son (Luke 15).
- **Its righteousness matches too.** He speaks of the speck and the log and of those who tithe mint and dill but neglect mercy. And he does not soften sin: "Now go and sin no more" (John 8:11 BSB).

- **Its shape matches.** Opponents bring a test case, and Jesus turns the test back on them without loosening the law. The Gospels record that pattern again and again.

The other possibility is that the story was composed later from the church's memory of Jesus' character. We cannot prove either one. But the story reads less like invention and more like Jesus.

So the honest summary has two halves, and both must land: the story is not John's. It may still be Jesus'.

7. What this does not take away

This loss is a different kind from Mark 16. No article of our confession is built on John 7:53 to 8:11. What we stand to lose is a beloved story and a line generations of children have learned. That makes it lighter, because no doctrine is at stake. It also makes it heavier, because the story is woven into how the church pictures Jesus.

The load-bearing distinction, once more

If John did not write these verses, they are not part of the inspired Gospel of John, and we cannot preach them with the confidence we preach John 1:1 or 3:16. But what the story shows about Jesus is shown all over the Gospels in text nobody disputes.

What the story shows	Where else we see it
Jesus receives sinners with mercy	Levi and the tax collectors (Mark 2:13 to 17); Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1 to 10); the prodigal son (Luke 15)
He forgives a woman the righteous despise	The woman who anointed his feet (Luke 7:36 to 50)
He meets a woman with a broken past, in John itself	The Samaritan woman at the well (John 4)
He exposes the self-righteous accuser	The speck and the log (Matthew 7:1 to 5); the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9 to 14)
Mercy and the call to turn from sin go together	The paralytic forgiven and healed (Mark 2:1 to 12); "Stop sinning" to the man at the pool (John 5:14)

Nothing the church confesses about Christ's mercy depends on these twelve verses.

The brackets are a label, not a verdict on the story

The ESV, NASB, and NET all keep the story on the page, set off and footnoted. The BSB prints it in the running text and labels it in a footnote at 7:52: "Some early manuscripts do not include John 7:53 through John 8:11." They are telling us two true things at once: what the manuscripts say, and what the church has long told. We can read both layers with a clear conscience. The Jesus we meet in this story is the Jesus we meet everywhere else: the friend of sinners, the only one without sin, who did not throw the first stone.

For discussion

1. The story moves around in later manuscripts, but most of the moves follow the church's reading calendar. Why does the case rest on the story's early absence from John rather than on its wandering?
2. How is this case different from Mark 16, both in the evidence and in what it asks of us pastorally?
3. "Not John's, but possibly Jesus'." Can you hold both halves at once? What makes that hard or easy?
4. If you were teaching children, how would you tell them this story honestly?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Pericope. Greek, "a section cut out." A self-contained passage or story.

Pericope adulterae. The passage about the woman caught in adultery, John 7:53 to 8:11.

Family 1 and Family 13. Two groups of closely related medieval Greek Gospel manuscripts. Family 1 puts the story at the end of John; Family 13 puts it in Luke.

Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C). A 400s Greek Bible that was scraped and written over with sermons of Ephrem the Syrian. Scholars read the Bible text underneath.

Palimpsest. A manuscript scraped and reused, with the older writing still faintly visible.

Obelus and asterisk. Marks in the margin that copyists used to flag a passage, sometimes as doubtful, sometimes to mark where a reading for public worship begins and ends.

Lectionary. A book of Scripture readings arranged for the church's calendar. Its reading plan explains many of the story's later moves.

Feast of Tabernacles. The autumn pilgrim feast that is the setting of John 7 and 8, with its lamp-lighting and water ceremonies.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 7, "The Comma Johanneum."

Do this one thing. Read John 7:45 to 8:12 straight through without the story, then read 7:53 to 8:11 on its own, as the story it is. Notice how both readings can stand side by side.

Also. Put 1 John 5:7 to 8 in a King James beside a modern translation. Write down exactly what is different, and what your modern Bible's footnote says.

Bring. Your Bible, your 1 John 5 notes, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. Why might God let a true memory of Jesus come to us by a winding road rather than through an apostle's pen?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for the Gospel of John, in the form the apostle gave it. Thanks be to God for the church, which has received and kept his Word through many hands. And thanks be to God for the story of the woman caught in adultery, wherever it began, because the Jesus we meet in it is the Jesus we meet everywhere else: the friend of sinners, the righteous one, the only one without sin, who chose not to throw the first stone. That Jesus rose from the tomb, and that Jesus we confess.

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Luke 15:2 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.