

# A Textual Analysis of the Passage about the Adulteress

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For anyone who loves God's Word and the story about Jesus' masterful management of the situation with a woman caught in adultery (found in most English Bibles at John 7:53–8:11), the thought that this heartrending segment of text may not belong to the Gospel of John seems understandably foul. By experience, I know that it can be tremendously disheartening to hear that a passage in your Bible, that you have held as dear and edifying for years, may not belong there. Such a proposition will usher in a flood of thoughts, many of which are troubling, disconcerting, and significantly unsettling. At first, you may sense a very uncomfortable emotion and secure yourself in a regimented insistence that it must belong—you prejudice that objections to its authenticity must be wrong. It may feel like a crack in a giant damn that can only invite doubt and unbelief, distrust in the Scriptures, and an overall personal spiritual weakness and public detriment to the faith. But those who love God and His Word need not be troubled. This article is intended to inform and encourage students of the Bible and promote a high view of Scripture and its reliability in light of textual criticism and particularly the dispute over this passage.

Our approach to this difficult subject will first seek to identify the dispute more clearly; after which will follow a very modest introduction to textual criticism. We will then look at the issue through the words of respected scholars of the New Testament. At this point, the foremost arguments against the passage's authenticity will be discussed. The final section will offer both some concluding thoughts and a brief address concerning the reliability of the Bible in its presentation of the inspired Word of God.

## The Dispute

The dispute at hand is over the authenticity of a twelve verse segment of text referred to as the *pericope de adultera* ('passage about the adulteress'), which is printed in most English Bibles at John 7:53–8:11. The issue stems primarily from a varied and unusual textual history. On the one hand, it lacks support in some significant textual witnesses of antiquity and bears internal difficulties as well. On the other hand, it has touched the hearts of millions of faithful worshippers of Christ throughout centuries of church history and continues to ring with such a resonating tone of authenticity that many Christians simply cannot imagine it inauthentic. There are lovers of Christ on both sides of this debate, possessing skills and expertise that surpass most students of Scripture. On both sides, there are men whose writings manifest a moving devotion to Christ and an inescapable appreciation and esteem of Holy Scripture. The solution, then, cannot simply rest on affinities, but must manifest carefully reasoned investigation, examination, and an objective pursuit of truth. Much of this dispute is over the position of tradition in relation to the premium of truth.

The dispute is three-fold: (1) Is this passage Johannine (belonging to John's authorship)? (2) Is this passage inspired of God? (3) Does this passage belong in the canon of Scripture? Each of these questions will be addressed below, but first some of the basics of textual criticism will be presented.

# Introduction to Textual Criticism

For all who love the Bible, criticism can be seen as both a dreaded foe and a dear friend. As much as we would rather avoid dealing with the issue altogether, in God's sovereign providence the existence of variants in textual transmission is a reality that the honest student of the Bible must face. While we may all prefer to resign in the securing thought that whatever is printed in my English Bible perfectly constitutes the God-breathed Scriptures comprehensively, the reality remains that not all manuscripts used in the transmission of the text contain exactly the same contents.

This is where textual criticism proves to be a dear friend. Far from being an enemy, it serves to defend the reliability of the texts of God's Word. While skeptics may attempt to exploit an apparent weakness in the authority of Scripture at this point, the instrumentality of textual criticism defeats their cause. To appreciate this perspective, a basic understanding of textual criticism must be surveyed.

It must first be acknowledged that the word 'criticism' does not always denote a negative reality. In the field of literary science, *criticism* is not necessarily *skepticism*. Literary criticism does not necessarily seek to discredit or attack a literary work.

The original documents of Scripture, written under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are called *autographs*. Under the sovereign hand of God, autographs that were recognized by the church to possess some unmistakable living apostolic authority and particular mark of divine service were copied onto what are called *manuscripts*. There are no known autographs *extant* (i.e. 'still existing') today. The best that the many libraries of the world avail to us are ancient manuscripts.

The New Testament is exceedingly unique in its ancient *witness* (i.e. 'testifying evidence still existing'). The number of extant manuscripts and fragments absolutely towers over any conceivable writings of similar antiquity. There are presently catalogued approximately 5,700 Greek manuscripts alone.<sup>1</sup> Not all of the manuscripts that contain the same material are perfectly identical. Human error in the *transcribing* (i.e. 'copying') process inevitably factors into manuscripts and yields what are called *variants*. A variant reading is a segment of text that has more than one set of characters, words, or marks that deviate from a more common reading.

There are two major branches of general literary criticism: *higher criticism* (or *historical criticism*) and *lower criticism* (or *textual criticism*). Those schools of criticism that deny the Scripture as the inerrant, infallible, and inspired Word of God are most generally represented in *tradition criticism*, *source criticism*, *form criticism*, *redaction criticism*, and *canonical criticism*. These are all methodologies that fall under the *historical criticism* umbrella and are generally pursued by liberal scholars. *Textual criticism*, on the other hand, does not approach the Scriptures skeptically, but rather seeks to identify which words belong to the original, Spirit-inspired, manuscripts and which words do not. This branch of study examines extant manuscripts, compares and contrasts them, and catalogues them. Then through a rigorous process of comparison, seeks to identify the most likely composition of the original document represented by the collection of manuscripts.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 52.

## TRANSMISSION

The New Testament experienced explosive duplication and distribution, unprecedented in the ancient or modern world. The process of duplication and distribution is known as the *transmission* of the text.

Through textual transmission, human errors were inevitably interjected, though never irreparably beyond the bounds of divine providential preservation. It is generally acknowledged that errors in transmission may result from *unintentional changes* (including faulty eyesight, faulty hearing, faulty concentration, errors in judgment) and *intentional changes* (including attempted 'fixes' of grammar and spelling, harmonizations, conflation of readings, alterations due to doctrine).

It should be noted that the vast majority of variants known today are not suspect of intentional deviation from a known original. Most variants are mistakes or attempted 'fixes' toward closer adherence to the assumed original. This should be kept in mind when entertaining the thought that scribes had their way with the text in a fairly loose manner. Warnings like those stated in Dt 4:2, Prov 30:6, and Rev 22:19 were not generally treated lightly by scribes. This is indicated in some of the *colophons* (i.e. scribal notes) that accompany manuscripts, like this prayer that appears at the end of a Coptic manuscript of the Gospels:

O reader, in spiritual love forgive me, and pardon the daring of him who wrote . . . There is no scribe who will not pass away, but what his hands have written will remain forever. Write nothing with your hand but that which you will be pleased to see at the resurrection. . . . May the Lord God Jesus Christ cause this holy copy to avail for the saving of the soul of the wretched man who wrote it.<sup>2</sup>

Sensitivity to accuracy was sometimes adjured by scribes, as in this example by Irenaeus:

I adjure you who shall copy out this book, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by his glorious advent when he comes to judge the living and the dead, that you compare what you transcribe, and correct it carefully against this manuscript from which you copy; and also that you transcribe this adjuration and insert it in the copy.<sup>3</sup>

## TEXT TYPES OR TEXTUAL FAMILIES

Scholars of the Greek New Testament have long since recognized the value of identifying relationships between surviving manuscripts. Where substantial evidence is objectively available, scholars attempt to classify these documents and document fragments into categories known as 'families' or 'text types'. A textual family is comprised of members that exhibit striking similarities of textual tradition, textual affinities, and scribal practices in transmission. Metzger explains the value of these classifications:

Once manuscripts are organized according to their textual affinities, the groups themselves can be evaluated with respect to the kinds of reading they have in common where manuscripts of other groups attest variation. On the basis of these evaluations, one group may be seen to approximate the original text more closely than others. Thus, for example, if one group typically attests readings that are harmonized with other passages or that are conflated from readings of other parts of the textual tradition, this group would be less valuable, as a rule, for determining the original text. Conversely, a group that normally does not attest secondary harmonizations or confections is more likely to preserve the original text.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> George Horner, *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Northern Dialect*, I (Oxford, 1898), xcvi f. Cited by Metzger, 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Apud* Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* v.xx.2. Cited by Metzger, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, 231-232.

There are three major textual families into which most manuscripts are grouped: *Western*, *Alexandrian*, and *Byzantine*. In addition to these, certain subtypes have been suggested, including *Koine* (proto-Byzantine) and *Caesarean*. In these two subtypes, Koine is most closely related to the Byzantine text type while Caesarean is a “distinctive mixture of Western and Alexandrian readings.”<sup>5</sup>

### Western Text Type

The Western text type is recognized as a product of the second-century copying practices. “The Western text is not aptly named, as it has been found as well outside the western parts of the Roman Empire.” This textual family embodies the least consistency and homogeneity of any textual family.

Because of the loose association of the various witnesses of the Western text, most scholars do not consider it the creation of an individual or several individuals revising an earlier text but, rather, the result of the undisciplined and ‘wild’ growth of manuscript tradition in the second century. . . . The chief characteristic of Western readings is fondness of paraphrase. Words, clauses, and even whole sentences are freely changed, omitted, or inserted. Sometimes the motive appears to have been harmonization, while at other times it was the enrichment of the narrative by inclusion of traditional or apocryphal material.<sup>6</sup>

### Alexandrian Text Type

The practices that are characteristic of the Western text type are to be clearly differentiated from other textual families. Metzger explains that “it would be a mistake to think that the uncontrolled copying practices that led to the formation of the Western textual tradition were followed everywhere that texts were reproduced in the Roman Empire. In particular, there is solid evidence that in at least one major see of early Christendom, the city of Alexandria, there was conscious and conscientious control exercised in the copying of the books of the New Testament.” Alexandria is widely known to have been a major center for learning and culture in the ancient world. It had a long history of classical scholarship, reflected even in the production of the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, namely the Septuagint (LXX). Alexandria’s premium on the preservation of literary works is attested by its world renowned and very ancient museum and library. Consequently, “it is no surprise, then, to find that textual witnesses connected to Alexandria attest a high quality of textual transmission from the earliest times.”<sup>7</sup>

### Byzantine Text Type

The Byzantine textual family is representative of the *Syrian*, *Koine*, *Eclessiastical*, and *Antiochian* text type labels. This particular text type is agreed by most scholars to represent a later development in the history of transmission. The Byzantine text is most substantially represented in the “majority text” or *Textus Receptus*.<sup>8</sup> It is characterized by “lucidity and completeness.” It is also known for *conflation* (i.e. combining two or more divergent readings into one expanded reading) and *harmonizing* divergent parallel Gospel passages. The Byzantine editors evidently formed their text “by taking over elements of the earlier extant traditions, choosing variant readings from among those already available rather than creating new ones that fit their sense of an improved text.” It came to be the fullest, smoothest, and most harmonized

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>6</sup> All quotations in this section are taken from Metzger and Ehrman, 276-7.

<sup>7</sup> All quotations in this section are taken from Metzger and Ehrman, 277-8.

<sup>8</sup> *Textus Receptus* is Latin for ‘received text’: Greek text of the New Testament, such as published by Erasmus in 1516, and underlying most later editions and translations, roughly the same as the Byzantine Text. — *Nelson’s New Christian Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).

reading of the New Testament, which brings no surprise that it became the most popular text during the early Middle Ages and was considered “the text of choice among most copyists.” Beyond these dynamics,

the influence of the Byzantine text was aided by historical factors: this was the text that became popular in Constantinople, whence it was distributed widely throughout the Byzantine Empire (where the Greek language was preserved). It is no surprise, then, that it was the text that came to dominate the Greek textual tradition from the seventh century onward so that the vast majority of witnesses surviving today are of this type. As we have seen, however, the fact that the bulk of witnesses attest the Byzantine text is no sign of its superiority when it comes to establishing the original text. To that end, the earlier attested text forms, the Western and most especially the Alexandrian, are today considered by most critics to be far superior.<sup>9</sup>

## Words from New Testament Scholars

The following list of quotations is arranged in alphabetical order according to the scholar’s name. While all have something important to contribute, special attention may be directed to James, Metzger, Wallace, and Westcott on account of their particular expertise in the field of New Testament manuscript studies.

**Henry Alford** (1810–1871), Dean of Canterbury, poet, preacher, painter, musician, biblical scholar, textual critic, and philologist, writes in his momentous, conservative, and well-respected *Greek Testament*:

This phænomenon (not that of the abundance of various readings, from which it is totally distinct) points undoubtedly to some inherent defect in the text of the passage itself, irrespective of all treatment subsequent to its establishment as a part of the sacred narrative. . . . our conclusion on the data must I think be, to retain the passage, as we retain Mark 16:9ff., with a distinction from the rest of the text.<sup>10</sup>

**C. K. Barrett** (1917–2011), considered one of the greatest British New Testament scholars of his day, this 37 year professor emeritus of Durham University writes concerning this passage:

It is certain that this narrative is not an original part of the gospel. Its textual history, of which only an outline can be given here, is decisive on this score. Those authorities which contain it differ markedly among themselves. . . . The weight of evidence against the originality of the passage cannot be resisted, nor can any good reason be found why the story, supposed original, should have been omitted from so many documents, or should have remained unknown to so many ecclesiastical writers. It cannot have been included in the gospel as at first published.<sup>11</sup>

**George Beasley-Murray** (1916–2000) was considered one of the finest twentieth-century Baptist New Testament scholars. He was principal of Spurgeon's College in England and also James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In his respected *World Bible Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Beasley-Murray writes:

It is universally agreed by textual critics of the Greek NT that this passage was not part of the Fourth Gospel in its original form. . . . It is clear that the story was not penned by the Fourth Evangelist (or

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<sup>9</sup> All quotations in this section are taken from Metzger and Ehrman, 279-80.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1844; reprint 1980), 784-5.

<sup>11</sup> Barrett, C. *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 589-90.

any of the other three Gospel writers), yet there is no reason to doubt its substantial truth. The saying that it preserves is completely in character with what we know of our Lord, and quite out of character with the stern discipline that came to be established in the developing Church. . . . We may regard the story as one those incidents in the life of our Lord that circulated in the primitive Church and did not come to the notice of our Evangelists.<sup>12</sup>

**Raymond E. Brown** (1928–1998), a prominent Roman Catholic scholar of the New Testament who was especially known for his expertise in the Gospel of John, under a heading entitled, “Problems of Authorship and of Canonicity,” writes:

These problems must be treated as a series of distinct questions. The first question is whether the story of the adulteress was part of the original Gospel according to John or whether it was inserted at a later period. The answer to this question is clearly that it was a later insertion. . . . Ambrose and Augustine wanted it read as part of the Gospel, and Jerome included it in the Vulgate.<sup>13</sup>

**F. F. Bruce** (1910–1990) was Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University at Manchester, England. An influential scholar, Bruce is often attributed as being instrumental in shaping the modern evangelical scholarship and New Testament studies. His first book, *New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (1943), was voted one of the top 50 books that shaped evangelicalism by *Christianity Today*. In his commentary on John, Bruce writes:

These twelve verses are ruled off from the preceding and following context in NIV, they are relegated to a footnote in RSV and printed on a separate page after the Gospel in 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 should be 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. . . . Many of the witnesses which do contain it mark it with asterisks or daggers, to indicate the uncertainty of its textual attestation. In style it has closer affinities with the Synoptic Gospels than with John.<sup>14</sup>

**John Calvin** (1509–1564), the eminently renowned reformer and biblical expositor, plainly acknowledged the lack of textual support for this passage. In keeping with Augustine—perhaps the most influential Church Father to Calvin’s thinking, he pointed out the wide reception that this text enjoyed by “the Latin Churches.” Importantly, Calvin did not argue for the authenticity of the passage, but rather resigned to allow that the text may be applied “to our advantage.”<sup>15</sup> What exactly Calvin intended by this he does not say, though it is reasonable to see that he considered the text devotionally profitable, nevertheless

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<sup>12</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 143.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, AB (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 335.

<sup>14</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 413.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, at times, took a similar position with texts from the Apocrypha. While he rejected apocryphal books as part of Holy Scripture, he occasionally quoted from them and considered content from them that did not contradict Scripture to be useful for edification and the stimulation of devotion (cf. *Institutes*, 1.10.8; 3.20.8). The editor notes: “Calvin quotes from six of the fifteen apocryphal books, including Tobit, The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, I Maccabees, and II Maccabees. The apocryphal books, though sometimes included in certain versions of the Bible, form no part of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is interesting to note that Jerome (340–420 A.D.), the translator of the Latin Vulgate, would not acknowledge these books as forming part of the Old Testament canon, but did feel that the reading of them might be of some value.” — John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997).

without bearing the insignia of Holy Scripture. His only words addressing the issue from his commentary are:

It is plain enough that this passage was unknown anciently to the Greek Churches; and some conjecture that it has been brought from some other place and inserted here. But as it has always been received by the Latin Churches, and is found in many old Greek manuscripts, and contains nothing unworthy of an Apostolic Spirit, there is no reason why we should refuse to apply it to our advantage.<sup>16</sup>

**D. A. Carson** is recognized as one of the leading New Testament scholars of the twenty-first century. He is the Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and an active writer and respected spokesman for reformed, evangelical, and historic Christianity. Carson states the following concerning this passage:

Despite the best efforts of Zane Hodges to prove that this narrative was originally part of John's Gospel, the evidence is against him, and modern English versions are right to rule it off from the rest of the text (NIV) or to relegate it to a footnote (RSV). These verses are present in most of the medieval Greek miniscule manuscripts, but they are absent from virtually all early Greek manuscripts that have come down to us, representing great diversity of textual traditions. . . . The diversity of placement confirms the inauthenticity of the verses. Finally, even if someone should decide that the material is authentic, it would be very difficult to justify the view that the material is authentically *Johannine* . . . On the other hand, there is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books. Similar stories are found in other sources.<sup>17</sup>

**Charles Erdman** (1866-1960), Presbyterian pastor and professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, writes:

This disputed passage is probably a true apostolic tradition introduced by some later editor of the Gospel, but it is so characterized by "the wisdom, holiness, and goodness of him to whom it is attributed, that it could no more have been invented than any other feature in the inimitable Life of Christ."<sup>18</sup>

**Donald Guthrie** (1916–1992), British New Testament scholar, conservative evangelical author, commentator, academic lecturer, and vice-principal of London Bible College, writes:

The strongest evidence is clearly for its exclusion from John's gospel, and yet the evidence in support of its genuineness is by no means inconsiderable. If genuine it might have been added originally to the four gospels, which would account for its attachment to John, in the Eastern order.<sup>19</sup>

**Everett F. Harrison** (1902–1999), missionary to China, Presbyterian pastor, professor emeritus at Dallas Theological Seminary and a founder and Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, writes:

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<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 17 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 319.

<sup>17</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 333-34.

<sup>18</sup> Charles R. Erdman, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1917), 75.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 334.

It is well known that the section of the Gospel according to John from 7:53 to 8:11 must be treated differently from the remainder of the text. In the first place, the manuscript authority behind it is too weak to permit us to regard it as a part of the original text.<sup>20</sup>

**E. W. Hengstenberg** (1802–1869), an outstanding conservative German Lutheran theologian and exegete (one who strenuously protested the higher textual criticism of his day), writes:

There can be no reasonable doubt that this section was not a component part of the original Gospel, but that it was introduced into it by another hand. . . . Internal reasons tend in the same direction as the external.<sup>21</sup>

**Montague R. James** (1862–1936), an English mediaeval scholar and provost of King's College, Cambridge (1905–1918), was responsible for cataloguing manuscripts in the ancient manuscript libraries of Cambridge colleges. In addressing issues with the mediaeval manuscripts he writes:

It is hardly necessary, perhaps, to observe that the Last Twelve Verses of St. Mark and the story of the woman taken in adultery (John vii. 53-viii. 11) form no part of the original text of the Gospels.<sup>22</sup>

**S. Lewis Johnson** (1915–2004), a conservative evangelical expositor, theologian, and professor of Greek, Hebrew, and systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Grace Theological Seminary, and Tyndale Theological Seminary, stated in a message:

Some of you will immediately recognize that this is a passage that is not found in some of the translations of the New Testament because the manuscript testimony for it is relatively weak. Among the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, there is really only one that contains these verses. There are a number of manuscripts of more recent age that do contain the section. . . . Therefore it has been the subject of considerable debate among New Testament textual critics. . . . the words of our Lord to the woman taken in adultery contain such a note of originality about them that many of the students of the NT have concluded that in spite of the fact that the section that we are reading is not found in almost all of the most ancient manuscripts, it nevertheless is probably an authentic account of an incident in our Lord's life. . . . So I am treating it as if it were an authentic account of the Lord Jesus Christ's ministry, although it is unlikely that it really belongs specifically to the Gospel of John itself.<sup>23</sup>

**Craig S. Keener**, Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, writes:

This passage bears all the marks of an interpolation; thus, despite a few valiant attempts to rescue it for the Fourth Gospel, the vast majority of scholars view it as inauthentic here. First of all, its textual history is suspect; one would hardly expect so many early manuscripts to omit such an important story about Jesus were it in their text. (If one responds that the later church wished to remove it because it felt that it condoned adultery or challenged androcentric bias, one wonders why other passages, such as Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, were not similarly excised; further, why 7:53-8:2 would be omitted along with 8:3-11.) . . . The story may reflect an authentic tradition about Jesus, as many, perhaps most, scholars think; although a few have attributed the passage to an

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<sup>20</sup> Everett F. Harrison, "The Son of God among the Sons of Men Part 8: Jesus and the Woman Taken in Adultery," *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 103, 412 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1946), 430.

<sup>21</sup> E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St John, Volume 1*, Clark's Foreign Theological Library (London: T&T Clark, 1865), 417-19.

<sup>22</sup> Montague R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1924), 34.

<sup>23</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, "The Woman Taken in Adultery," sermon delivered August 1, 1982 at Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas.



origin in Luke (which it would fit better theologically but where the textual evidence is even weaker than in John), most scholars are probably right that it stems from oral tradition. In any case, it probably bears no other direct relationship with the rest of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>24</sup>

**Homer Kent**, former president of Grace Theological Seminary and professor emeritus of Greek and New Testament for fifty years, succinctly describes the situation:

This paragraph has had the strangest history of any portion of the New Testament. It does not appear at all in the major manuscripts . . . The most important early document to include it at this place in John is codex D. Many later manuscripts that do include it have it marked with asterisks or marginal notations to indicate some question about it. What is even stranger is its unstable position. It occurs at the end of the Gospel in some manuscripts, after John 7:36 in one, and after 7:44 in some Georgian version copies. In one group of manuscripts it even occurs in the Gospel of Luke after 21:38. Nevertheless, the passage was known early, and the general conservative opinion of this portion is that it records an authentic incident in the life of Christ, although there is serious doubt whether John wrote it as part of his Gospel.<sup>25</sup>

**Andreas J. Köstenberger**, Director of Ph.D. Studies and Senior Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes:

As is widely recognized, the status of the pericope of the adulterous woman in 7:53–8:11 as an original part of John’s Gospel is highly in doubt. Virtually all translations (for good reasons, as will be seen) place the passage in square brackets, indicating probable non-inclusion in the original Gospel. . . Thus, though Burge (1984: 148) may be right when he classifies the pericope as “an edifying agraphon of Jesus,” the fact remains that the account almost certainly was not part of the original Gospel and therefore should not be regarded as part of the Christian canon.<sup>26</sup>

**Colin Kruse**, professor of New Testament at Melbourne School of Theology in Australia, concludes:

It is very unlikely that this attractive story was an original part of the Fourth Gospel. It is not found in the earliest and most reliable Greek manuscripts.<sup>27</sup>

**R. C. H. Lenski** (1846–1936), a distinguished Lutheran biblical scholar and exegete, plainly asserts in his commentary on John:

7:53–8:11 is not an integral part of John’s Gospel but part of the early oral tradition (antedating the year 70); it was very early put into written form, and one of its two versions was eventually inserted into John’s Gospel. These findings of the text critics must be accepted as facts. Between 7:52 and 8:12 nothing intervenes. The spurious section is foreign to John’s Gospel, 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.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 735-6.

<sup>25</sup> Kent, Homer. *Light in the Darkness: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2005), 132-3.

<sup>26</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 245-8.

<sup>27</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 197.

<sup>28</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 592.

**John F. MacArthur**, pastor, author, speaker, and president of The Master's Seminary, especially known for his exemplary faithfulness to expository preaching, writes in his commentary on the Gospel of John:

Although it is often cited and taught, this familiar passage may not have actually been an original part of John's gospel. Along with Mark 16:9-20, it is one of the longest and most famous New Testament texts whose authenticity is questioned. . . . The passage contains several internal indicators that cast doubt on its authenticity. . . . Since the story does not seem to fit here, some manuscripts insert it in different locations. . . . The external evidence also casts doubt on the authenticity of these verses. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts, from a variety of textual traditions, omit it. Others that do include it mark it to indicate that there were questions regarding its authenticity. Many of the most significant early versions (translations of the Scriptures into other languages) also omit this section. None of the early Greek church fathers—even those who dealt with the text of John verse by verse—commented on this passage. . . . This passage, then, was most likely not part of the original text of John's gospel. Yet it "is beyond doubt an authentic fragment of apostolic tradition" (Westcott, John, 125) that describes an actual historical event from Christ's life. It contains no teaching that contradicts the rest of Scripture. The picture it paints of the wise, loving, forgiving Savior is consistent with the Bible's portrait of Jesus Christ. Nor is it the kind of story the early church would have made up about Him. . . . The story was most likely history, a piece of oral tradition that circulated in parts of the Western church.<sup>29</sup>

**Bruce Metzger** (1914–2007) is considered by many to be one of the foremost authorities on the manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. Educated in Greek and Latin classics, Metzger became a distinguished professor of Princeton Theological Seminary, where he taught for 46 years and did extensive work in Bible translation and textual criticism. He served on several translation committee boards and was one of the editors of the *Greek New Testament*, UBS 4<sup>th</sup> edition. In his *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Metzger writes:

The evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the pericope of the adulteress is overwhelming. It is absent from . . . early and diverse manuscripts . . . When one adds to this impressive and diversified list of 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 8:12 ff., the case against its being of Johannine authorship appears to be 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.<sup>30</sup>

**Heinrich A. W. Meyer** (1800–1873) was a conservative German New Testament scholar and pastor who was devoted to expositing the texts of Scripture and writing commentaries on the same. His commentary series<sup>31</sup> set a standard for exegetes of the New Testament that continues to be consulted by scholars today as an important academic commentary. Significantly, he is attributed with founding the modern principles of historico-grammatical exegesis. A capable translator, Meyer produced his own

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<sup>29</sup> John MacArthur, *John 1–11*, MNTC (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2006), 322-3.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 187-88.

<sup>31</sup> *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, which was begun in 1829 and has been constantly revised and rewritten by a long series of distinguished scholars down to the present time.

translation of the New Testament and also worked on the revision of Luther's German translation of the Bible. Concerning this passage, Meyer writes:

*The section treating of the woman taken in adultery, vv. 1–11, together with 7:53, is a document by some unknown author belonging to the apostolic age, which, after circulating in various forms of text, was inserted in John's Gospel, probably by the second, or, at latest, by the third century. . . . The Johannean authorship was denied by Erasmus, Calvin, Beza, Grotius, Wetstein, Semler, Morus, Haenlein, Wegscheider, Paulus, Tittmann (Melet. p. 318 ff.), Knapp, Seyffarth, Lücke, Credner, Tholuck, Olshausen, Krabbe, B. Crusius, Bleek, Weisse, Lücke, De Wette, Guericke, Reuss, Brückner, Luthardt, Ewald, Baeumlein, Hengstenberg (who regards the section as a forgery made for a particular purpose), Schenkel, Godet, Scholten, and most critics: Lachmann and Tischendorf also have removed the section from the text.<sup>32</sup>*

**Leon Morris** (1914–2006) was considered a world-renowned New Testament scholar and voice for conservative evangelicals, called by some a “Valiant for Truth.” Formerly the Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne and Visiting Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, he was a respected writer and Bible commentator. His scholarship extended to assist in the production of the NIV and ESV Bible translations. In his NICNT commentary on the Gospel of John, Morris writes:

The textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the Gospel. . . . The very large number of variants indicates that the textual history of this pericope is different from that of the fourth Gospel. . . . While the spirit of the narrative is in accordance with that of this Gospel the language is not Johannine. . . . 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. And it can scarcely have been composed in the early church with its sternness about sexual sin.<sup>33</sup>

**John Piper**, well known pastor, author, and speaker, stated the following in a sermon that he delivered on this text:

Most New Testament scholars do not think it was part of the Gospel of John when it was first written, but was added centuries later. . . . I think they are right. . . . This is a hugely technical field of scholarship that at the upper levels requires not only the ability to read ancient languages, but the ability to read them in kinds of ancient handwritten scripts that are very demanding. . . . The story may not belong to John's Gospel. In fact, the story may never have happened. But this point of the story [come for grace and sin no more] is unshakably true. This is the pervasive message of the New Testament.<sup>34</sup>

**Alfred Plummer** (1841–1926), Dean of Trinity College Oxford, Master of University College, Durham, and Professor of New Testament, a biblical scholar and respected commentator, writes:

Of the various questions which arise respecting the paragraph that follows (7:53–8:11) one at least may be answered with something like certainty,—that it is *no part of the Gospel of S. John*. . . . So that

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<sup>32</sup> Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John, Volume 2*, ed. Frederick Crombie, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1875), 1-3.

<sup>33</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 778-79.

<sup>34</sup> John Piper, “Neither Do I Condemn You,” sermon delivered at Bethlehem Baptist Church on March 6, 2011.

the internal and external evidence when put together is overwhelmingly against the paragraph being part of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>35</sup>

**Herman Ridderbos** (1909–2007), professor emeritus of the Theological School of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands in Kampen, known as one of the foremost leaders in the redemptive-historical approach to Biblical theology, writes:

The now following passage—often described as the *pericope de adultera*—is generally regarded as a later insertion, not belonging to the original Gospel. The arguments for this view are not only that it constitutes a clear interruption of the text (between 7:53 and 8:12) and differs sharply in language and style from John, but above all that the textual evidence strongly argues against the idea that originally this pericope belonged to the Fourth Gospel. . . . But it cannot be denied that the story is in this context an interruption rather than an integrated part of the text. Despite the important and insightful studies that have been and continue to be devoted to the text-critical, church-historical, and material aspects of this pericope, various questions remain that are not, and probably cannot be, definitely answered, as to the separate life of the pericope, its late acceptance in the canonical writings, and its place in the Gospel of John. A return to the originality of the pericope at this location does not seem possible.<sup>36</sup>

**A. T. Robertson** (1863–1934), eminent Greek scholar and professor emeritus of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and producer of the landmark volume *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research* (1454 pages), plainly asserts:

This verse and through 8:12 (the passage concerning the woman taken in adultery) is certainly not a genuine part of John's Gospel. . . . It is probably a true story for it is like Jesus, but it does not belong to John's Gospel.<sup>37</sup>

**J. C. Ryle** (1816–1900), Dean of Salisbury and first Anglican bishop of Liverpool, England, explained the situation of this passage as follows:

These eleven verses, together with the last verse of the preceding chapter, form perhaps the gravest critical difficulty in the New Testament. Their genuineness is disputed. It is held by many learned Christian writers, who have an undoubted right to be heard on such matters, that the passage was not written by St. John, that it was written by an uninspired hand, and probably at a later date, and that it has no lawful claim to be regarded as a part of canonical Scripture.<sup>38</sup>

**Merrill C. Tenney** (1904–1985) was for many years dean of the Graduate School and professor of New Testament and Greek at Wheaton College. He was the general editor of the Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary, author of several commentaries, his popular *New Testament Survey*, and served on the original translation board of the New American Standard Bible. He notes:

This paragraph of text is not included in the earliest and best manuscripts and versions. Many manuscripts omit it entirely; others include it, but are so marked as to indicate that it was considered of doubtful authenticity; eleven relegate it to the end of the Gospel; and one group of manuscripts places it after Luke 21:38, and not in John at all. . . . Furthermore, its text contains a

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<sup>35</sup> A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to S. John*, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), 181.

<sup>36</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1997), 285-7.

<sup>37</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Jn 7:53.

<sup>38</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John 7:1–10:30* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, reprint 2007), 65.

disproportionately large number of variants, which is generally a sure sign that it has received less than average care in transmission. It is not quoted by the earlier fathers, whether Latin or Greek. On the other hand, a few of the later uncial manuscripts and a large number of the cursives do contain it, and it is especially mentioned by church fathers from the time of Jerome and Augustine in the fifth century. So conservative a textual scholar as Scrivener says that "on all intelligent principles of mere criticism the passage must needs be abandoned: and such is the conclusion arrived at by all the critical editors." . . . To say that the passage is not an integral part of John does not dismiss it, however. It is still necessary to account for its presence. Even those who exclude it from the body of John on textual grounds admit that its tenor is wholly in keeping with the character and ministry of Jesus, and that it doubtless constitutes a genuine account of an episode of His career, though it may be misplaced.<sup>39</sup>

**Friedrich A. G. Tholuck** (1799–1877), influential German scholar and reported master of nineteen languages, writes:

We here find a section from v. 53 to 8:12 whose genuineness seems doubtful. . . . Under these circumstances we must decide, both upon internal, and especially upon external grounds, that it is probable if not indisputable, that this narrative was interpolated in its present position in the third century. If we search for the origin of it, we shall find most in favour of the supposition that it was derived from a pure evangelical tradition.<sup>40</sup>

**Daniel B. Wallace**, quite possibly the foremost living authority in the field of Greek New Testament manuscripts, is Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, founder and Executive Director of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, and internationally renowned Greek scholar. He has authored an intermediate Greek grammar that is recognized as a standard seminary textbook in the English-speaking world today. He has also served as a consultant for four Bible translations—ESV, TNIV, New King James Bible, and New English Translation. Concerning this passage, Wallace writes:

The next pericope, 7:53–8:11 is not original to the gospel of John and seriously disrupts the flow of argument (cf. D. B. Wallace, "Reconsidering 'The Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery Reconsidered,'" *New Testament Studies* 39 [1993] 290-96, for internal arguments on the inappropriateness of this pericope here).<sup>41</sup>

Wallace serves as senior New Testament editor for the NET Bible. The notes published for this section of the Gospel of John state:

This entire section, 7:53–8:11, traditionally known as the pericope adulterae, is not contained in the earliest and best MSS and was almost certainly not an original part of the Gospel of John. Among modern commentators and textual critics, it is a foregone conclusion that the section is not original but represents a later addition to the text of the Gospel. . . . In the final analysis, the weight of evidence in this case must go with the external evidence. The earliest and best MSS do not contain the pericope. It is true with regard to internal evidence that an attractive case can be made for inclusion, but this is by nature subjective (as evidenced by the fact that strong arguments can be given against such as well). In terms of internal factors like vocabulary and style, the pericope does not stand up

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<sup>39</sup> Merrill Tenney, *John, The Gospel Of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 137-8.

<sup>40</sup> A. Tholuck, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. A. Kaufman (Philadelphia: Perkins and Marvin, 1836), 202-03.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *New Testament Introductions and Outlines* (unpublished syllabus, 2010).

very well. The question may be asked whether this incident, although not an original part of the Gospel of John, should be regarded as an authentic tradition about Jesus. It could well be that it is ancient and may indeed represent an unusual instance where such a tradition survived outside of the bounds of the canonical literature. However, even that needs to be nuanced.<sup>42</sup>

**B. F. Westcott** (1825–1901), distinguished Bishop of Durham, Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, and leading scholar of New Testament studies, succinctly writes:

This account of a most characteristic incident in the Lord's life is certainly not a part of St John's narrative. The evidence against its genuineness, as an original piece of the Gospel, both external and internal, is over-whelming; but on the other hand it is beyond doubt an authentic fragment of apostolic tradition.<sup>43</sup>

## COMMENTS IN STUDY BIBLES

Knowing that many Christians make use of study Bibles, as a pastor it is important to be aware of what they may encounter. Far better to address this issue from the pulpit than to skirt or minimize the issue knowing that a dear member of the congregation may at some point become troubled when reading their study Bible. The following is a selected list of comments found in popular conservative study Bibles.

### The Apologetics Study Bible

This event is not found in the oldest and best manuscripts. It is, however, widely believed to be a true story about Jesus that was preserved in the oral tradition and eventually added by well-meaning scribes.<sup>44</sup>

### Believer's Study Bible

The pericope, or story-unit, of the woman caught in adultery is absent from the entire Alexandrian text and most of the ancient versions. On the other hand, it does occur in numerous manuscripts, as well as in the writings of Augustine and Jerome (see note in center column). Regardless of whether these verses were originally in the autograph of John or whether they were added later by John or by someone else, there is every probability that the story represents an actual event in the life of Jesus. No questionable doctrine is present in this text, and the event is certainly characteristic of the way Jesus met such circumstances. It is topically appropriate in this place, since the theme of judging is introduced in 7:51; although from a linguistic/literary perspective, 7:52 and 8:12 naturally flow together without the interruption of this pericope.<sup>45</sup>

### ESV Study Bible

There is considerable doubt that this story is part of John's original Gospel, for it is absent from all of the oldest manuscripts. But there is nothing in it unworthy of sound doctrine. It seems best to view the story as something that probably happened during Jesus' ministry but that was not originally part of what John wrote in his Gospel. Therefore it should not be considered as part of Scripture and should not be used as the basis for building any point of doctrine unless confirmed in Scripture.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), John 7:53.

<sup>43</sup> Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John Introduction and Notes on the Authorized Version* (London: J. Murray, 1908), 125.

<sup>44</sup> *The Apologetics Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), 1587.

<sup>45</sup> *Believer's Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), Jn 7:53.

<sup>46</sup> *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2039.

### **The MacArthur Study Bible**

This section dealing with the adulteress most likely was not a part of the original contents of John. It has been incorporated into various manuscripts at different places in the gospel (e.g., after vv. 36, 44, 52, or 21:25), while one manuscript places it after Lk 21:38. External manuscript evidence representing a great variety of textual traditions is decidedly against its inclusion, for the earliest and best manuscripts exclude it. Many manuscripts mark the passage to indicate doubt as to its inclusion. Significant early versions exclude it. No Gr. church father comments on the passage until the twelfth century. The vocabulary and style of the section also are different from the rest of the gospel, and the section interrupts the sequence of v. 52 with 8:12ff. Many, however, do think that it has all the earmarks of historical veracity, perhaps being a piece of oral tradition that circulated in parts of the western church, so that a few comments are in order. In spite of all these considerations of the likely unreliability of this section, it is possible to be wrong on the issue, and thus it is good to consider the meaning of this passage and leave it in the text, just as with Mk 16:9–20.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Reformation Study Bible**

These verses are not present in some Greek manuscripts, and in others they appear at different locations, such as after 7:36, or even in Luke.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Ryrie Study Bible**

This story, though probably authentic, is omitted in many manuscripts and may not have been originally a part of this Gospel.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *The MacArthur Study Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 1597.

<sup>48</sup> *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version*, ed. R. C. Sproul and Keith Mathison (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2005), 1525.

<sup>49</sup> *The Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Version* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1978), 1615.

# Arguments Against Authenticity

While this passage bears the marks of true genius and is anchored in the hearts of many by deeply sentimental affinities, the arguments against Johannine authenticity are both wide and substantial. No passage in the history of New Testament studies has presented greater variety in textual attestation—no honest student of the Bible can ignore this. The arguments against its authenticity derive from two categories of evidence: *external* and *internal*. The evidences from each of these categories will be discussed and followed by an address to counter arguments. Questions concerning authorship and authority will then be discussed.

## ARGUMENTS FROM EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

*External evidence* is data that is concerned with the attributes of a textual witness (i.e. manuscript or fragment) as a unit. This includes the date of the witness, geographical distribution, textual genealogy, text type, etc. For variants, like the *pericope de adultera*, external evidence is not at all concerned with the linguistic style, vocabulary, or contextual continuity. Instead, external evidences essentially focus on where this segment of text is found, in what manuscripts, when, from what geography, and with what measure of consistency.

The seven most substantial arguments against the authenticity of the *pericope de adultera* from external evidence are as follows:

### 1. Absent in the Finest Greek Manuscripts

As indicated in the quotations of scholars above, this is the foremost argument against the passage. It is absent in the finest extant Greek manuscripts.<sup>50</sup> These manuscripts are the ‘finest’ in the sense that they are the earliest extant documents available, are of the highest literary quality, and represent an impressive breadth of diverse origination. “The most notable exception is the Western uncial D, known for its independence in numerous other places.”<sup>51</sup>

Therefore the evidence could be summarized by saying that almost all early MSS of the Alexandrian texttype omit the pericope, while most MSS of the Western and Byzantine texttype include it. But it must be remembered that “Western MSS” here refers only to D, a single witness (as far as Greek MSS are concerned). Thus it can be seen that practically all of the earliest and best MSS extant omit the pericope; it is found only in MSS of secondary importance.<sup>52</sup>

### 2. Absent in Some Ancient Versions

A *version* is the technical designation for a translation of the New Testament. So versions were translations of Greek manuscripts into other languages. In the study of the history of the New Testament, ancient versions represent the very early and prolific advance of the New Testament into cultures and languages of the diverse people groups of the world. In addition to the evidences presented by surviving Greek manuscripts, ancient versions serve as witnesses to even earlier Greek sources from which they were derived. So the witness of an ancient version can prove to be quite helpful in assessing the authenticity of a variant.

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<sup>50</sup> These manuscripts include: p66, p75, ⸚, B, L, N, T, W, X, Y, Δ, Θ, Ψ, 070<sup>vid</sup>, 0141, 0211, 22, 33, 124, 157, 209, 213, 397, 565, 713, 788, 799, 821, 828, 849, 865, 1230, 1241, 1242, 1253, 1333, 2193, and family 1424. Codices A and B are defective in this segment but without apparent space to accommodate the pericope.

<sup>51</sup> Carson, 333.

<sup>52</sup> *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*, Biblical Studies Press, 2006.



In the case of the *pericope de adultera*, it is plainly absent from the best manuscripts of the Peshitta. It is missing in the Old Syriac (Syr<sup>s,c</sup>) and Arabic editions of Tatian's *Diatessaron*. It is not included in the old Coptic versions of the NT (it is absent from the Sahidic, sub-Achmimic, and old Bohairic manuscripts). It is missing from some of the Armenian manuscripts and entirely from the Old Georgian versions. Even in the West, it is absent from the Gothic version and several Old Latin manuscripts. "This gives us a general picture that the text was introduced very late."<sup>53</sup>

### 3. Absent in Ancient Lectionaries

*Ancient lectionaries* are manuscripts containing New Testament Scripture that were formatted for regular scheduled reading in church. In the likeness of the synagogue, the early Christian church adopted the practice of reading passages from the New Testament on appointed days of the week and year. Ancient lectionaries "are valuable in preserving a type of text that is frequently much older than the actual age of the manuscript might lead one to suspect."<sup>54</sup> They prove helpful in tracking the proper sequence and order of a given Gospel or Epistle of the New Testament as they typically presented the text of Scripture in the very order in which it was written, with accompanying annotations and markers to aid the lector.

It is significant to note that the earliest lectionaries do not contain the *pericope de adultera*. Westcott and Hort note that early Greek lectionaries, which formed the Constantinopolitan text of liturgy, pass immediately from what we know as John 7:52 to 8:12. The *pericope de adultera* is simply absent from these important lections. "The verses thus wanting do not appear elsewhere among the Constantinopolitan lections for Sundays or ordinary weekdays; and their absence is the more significant because they are the only distinct and substantive portion of St John's Gospel which is not included in these lections."<sup>55</sup>

### 4. Absent in the Writings of the Early Church

Another significant argument against the authenticity of this passage is the utter silence from the earliest students of the apostles' writings. Geisler reminds us that:

The patristic citations of Scripture are not primary witnesses to the text of the New Testament, but they do serve two very important secondary roles. First, they give overwhelming support to the existence of the twenty-seven authoritative books of the New Testament canon. . . . Second, the quotations are so numerous and widespread that if no manuscripts of the New Testament were extant, the New Testament could be reproduced from the writings of the early Fathers alone.<sup>56</sup>

The absence of any commentary on this passage, especially among the Greek commentators, is of no little importance when evaluating the originality of this narrative. It is noted in the *Ancient Christian Commentary* on the Gospel of John that "the account is lacking in Origen, Chrysostom, Cyril and Theodore's commentaries. Augustine and Bede seem to be the primary patristic witness to the text, although it is also included in the *Didascalia*, Gregory the Great, a brief reference in Cassiodorus's comment on Psalm 56, Ambrosiaster *Question* 102.1 (*CSEL* 50:199) and Didymus (see *NTS* 34:25)."<sup>57</sup> Tholuck adds, "As to the Fathers, their authority is decidedly unfavourable to the genuineness of this section, for it is wanting in Origen, Cyrill, Chrysostom, Nonnus, Theophylact, Apollinaris, Basil, Theodorus Mopsuestia. These and other

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<sup>53</sup> Gary M. Burge, "A Specific Problem In The New Testament Text And Canon: The Woman Caught In Adultery (John 7:53-8:11)," in *JETS* vol. 27, 2 (Lynchburg, VA: The Evangelical Theological Society, 1984), 142.

<sup>54</sup> Metzger, 47.

<sup>55</sup> Brooke F. Westcott and Fenton J. A. Hort, *New Testament in the Original Greek: Appendix* (New York: Macmillan, 1895), 84.

<sup>56</sup> Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 430.

<sup>57</sup> Joel C. Elowsky, *John 1-10*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 4a* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 272.

Fathers of the Church never once mention it, although there was good reason why they should have quoted it in their controversies about the strict exercise of the discipline of penance, in order to commend thereby the adoption of more mild principles.”<sup>58</sup> It is significant to remember that Origen, Chrysostom, and Theophylact are distinguished commentators of the Gospel of John, and yet none of them show any knowledge of this passage. Burge notes that “in his commentary on John, Origen (d. 253) moves directly from 7:52 to 8:12. The metrical paraphrase of Nonnus (c. 400) also skips from 7:52 to 8:12, and Cosmas of Jerusalem (c. 700) in his list of unique Johannine narratives omits our story altogether.”<sup>59</sup>

It has been observed by many scholars that “no Greek commentator on the Gospel before Euthymius Zigabenus (twelfth century) discusses the passage, and Euthymius stated that the accurate copies of the Gospel do not contain it. No Eastern Fathers cite the passage prior to the tenth century. The earliest Western Fathers, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, also make no reference to it.”<sup>60</sup> Raymond Brown, a New Testament scholar who appears to follow the canonical tradition of Jerome and the Latin Vulgate and therefore accepts this passage as canonical, concedes that “there are no comments on this passage by the Greek writers on John of the 1st Christian millennium, and it is only from ca. 900 that it begins to appear in the standard Greek text. The evidence for the passage as Scripture in the early centuries is confined to the Western Church.”<sup>61</sup> But again, the earliest attestation even in the West (i.e. Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, etc.) is silent on the passage. Meyer remarks that in addition to a list of Western writers, they “as well as the *Catena*, are altogether silent about this section.”<sup>62</sup> The *Catena* referred to here is an ancient biblical commentary that treats the texts of the New Testament with a verse-by-verse ‘chain’ of quotations from various sources that seeks to elucidate the verses of Scripture. Similar to the *Catena*, this passage is absent in the early and important document known as the *Diatessaron*. This was a harmony of the four Gospels (Gr. *dia* ‘through’, *tessarōn* ‘the four’), which was compiled in the form of a continuous narrative by Tatian in approximately A.D. 150–160.<sup>63</sup>

There is, however, mention of this story in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (ca. 3<sup>rd</sup> cent.),<sup>64</sup> but without any attribution to the Gospel of John or other canonical Scripture. Likewise, Didymus the Blind<sup>65</sup> and Pacian of Barcelona<sup>66</sup> show awareness of the story but without connection to the Gospel of John.

Therefore, the chief counter argument is posed by the comments of Jerome (ca. 415) and Augustine (ca. 420), two very prominent Church Fathers of the fifth-century West who advocated the inclusion of this passage in John.

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<sup>58</sup> A. Tholuck, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. A. Kaufman (Boston; Philadelphia: Perkins and Marvin; Henry Perkins, 1836), 200.

<sup>59</sup> Burge, 142.

<sup>60</sup> Beasley-Murray, 143; Metzger, 188.

<sup>61</sup> Brown, 335.

<sup>62</sup> Meyer, 2.

<sup>63</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 480. “From an early date it circulated widely in Syriac-speaking Churches, where it became the standard text of the Gospels down to the 5th cent.”

<sup>64</sup> Latin title of a Syriac treatise, originally in Greek, called “Catholic Teaching of the Twelve Apostles and Holy Disciples of our Redeemer,” included in the Apostolic Constitutions. It describes the order of the early church, bishop’s duties, penance, liturgical worship, the administration of offerings, and the settlement of disputes. —*Nelson’s New Christian Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> Didymus (ca. 398) writes, “we find, therefore, in certain gospels, a woman...” (*Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, according to the Tura Papyrus). It is interesting to note that Didymus elsewhere refers the Gospel according to the Hebrews as a ‘gospel’ (see below on ‘Canonicity’).

<sup>66</sup> Pacian (ca. 370-390), *Epistle 3*, 39, PL 13:1077.

Jerome (ca. 345-420) was commissioned to provide a standardized Latin translation of the both the Old and New Testaments, which was sanctioned as the authorized Latin version of the Bible. It became so widely popular in the West that it was referred to as the *Vulgate* (from *vulgata*, which means ‘common’ in Latin). For this discussion, it is important to keep in mind that the Vulgate emerged out of need. “In the late fourth century, Pope Damasus commissioned Jerome to bring order to the existing Latin versions”<sup>67</sup> because “the chaos of the older Latin translation was notorious.”<sup>68</sup> Jerome sought to normalize the ‘wild’, ‘chaos’ of the Old Latin versions, making changes appropriately toward this end. “He altered the Western order of the Gospels to that known today and restored texts peculiar to each Evangelist which had been harmonized in the Old Latin.”<sup>69</sup> In his edited translation of the Gospel of John, Jerome included the *pericope de adultera*, the rationalization of which was later defended: “In the Gospel according to John in many codices [manuscripts], both Greek and Latin, is found the story of the adulterous woman who was accused before the Lord.”<sup>70</sup> There is only one clear reference made by Jerome to the passage in his writings, and that was in his treatise *Against the Pelagians*, wherein he writes: “None of the accusers of the woman taken in adultery were without sin. Christ wrote their names in the earth.”<sup>71</sup> There were many variations of the story, some of which described what Christ wrote on the ground, and Jerome’s reference may reflect one of the extended versions of the story. His inclusion of the passage in the Vulgate clearly testifies to the even earlier existence of it in other Western manuscripts. However, while several Old Latin manuscripts are known today, the Greek manuscripts that Jerome refers to are presently unknown, being without any extant witnesses. The weight of Jerome’s endorsement is significantly diminished by at least three factors: (a) the family of manuscripts from which Jerome apparently drew from was notoriously ‘wild’ and marked with great variation; (b) the Western textual base as well as audience is known to have accommodated apocryphal material (other apocryphal stories are found in Western manuscripts); (c) in addition to translator, Jerome served as single editor, whose procedure for including and excluding material was quite proprietary. While Jerome is an important voice of the fifth-century and his comments certainly betray an early attestation of the story, the evidence demonstrates a fairly early popularity of the story among Latin Christians but does not necessarily establish Johannine originality.

Augustine (ca. 354–430) was perhaps the most influential thinking and writer in the first post-apostolic millennium of the church. Augustine included the story in his *Harmony of the Gospels* and made reference to it in several other places. What is interesting is that Augustine defended the passage, which clearly indicates that there was dispute over its inclusion. He stated that he believed (*credo*) that the passage had been rejected by persons “of weak faith, or rather enemies of the true faith,” who feared “that the story would give their wives encouragement to sin with impunity.”<sup>72</sup> The main problem with this theory is that it is completely lacking of any support historically. There is no such discussion concerning the passage until Augustine, nor is there any historical precedent for the excision of an entire passage on the grounds of content (see below). This was conjecture on Augustine’s part. It was framed in a treatise concerning ‘adulterous marriage’ and presented as an appeal against licentiousness while maintaining a proper view of grace and forgiveness. His defense of the passage was clearly in the interest of his argument and not on the

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<sup>67</sup> *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 1115.

<sup>68</sup> *Biographical Entries from Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), s.v. “Jerome.”

<sup>69</sup> Carroll D. Osburn, “Vulgate” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1361-62.

<sup>70</sup> *In evangelio secundum Johannem in multis et Græcis et Latinis codicibus invenitur de adultera muliere quæ accusata est apud dominum* (*Novum Testamentum Graece: Apparatus Criticus*, ed. Constantin von Tischendorf, Caspar René Gregory and Ezra Abbot [Lipsiae: Giesecke & Devrient, 1869-94], 1:829).

<sup>71</sup> Jerome, “Against the Pelagians”, *NPNF* 2:6 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 469.

<sup>72</sup> Beasley-Murray, 143.

grounds of textual evidence, apostolic authority, or other citable source. There is no disputing the beauty of the story, nor its power to convey the character and wisdom of Christ in a most culturally offensive situation, but even these things do not establish Johannine originality.

Another allusion to the passage is made by Ambrose, bishop of Milan (ca. 339–397). Ambrose was instrumental in Augustine’s early Christian life and proved to be a significant influence upon him. It is no wonder that Augustine was partial to the passage since it appears that Ambrose was before him. Ambrose is recorded as saying:

At the same time also the Gospel which has been covered, could produce extraordinary anxiety in the inexperienced, in which you have noticed an adulteress presented to Christ and also dismissed without condemnation. . . . How indeed could Christ err? It is not right that this should come into our mind.<sup>73</sup>

While these testimonies are valuable, they are quite isolated in their representation of ancient Christendom. To be sure, their voices are heard today because they were voices of unrivaled influence. It is of no little significance that they are voices of the fifth-century (except Ambrose, of course) and are all representative of Western Latin tradition. Again, there are other apocryphal materials in Western manuscripts and there are no witnesses of the *pericope de adultera* known from before the fourth century.

In response to these few witnesses from the West, there is Tertullian (ca. 200–220), who is also from the West but earlier. In his treatise, *On Modesty*, Tertullian deals directly with the sin and forgiveness of adultery and shows absolutely no awareness of the story at hand. Because he strictly held to a position that adultery cannot be forgiven, it follows that he would have had to address this story if it were widely known and accepted as authentically apostolic. Otherwise, his opponents would have easily rebutted his arguments. Even more striking is Cyprian (ca. 258), who like Tertullian is from the West and ardently argues against adultery, but also mentions the possibility of repentance and forgiveness. In the case of Cyprian, he quotes John 5:14, “Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you,” to make his case. Not only does this show Cyprian’s familiarity with the Gospel of John, but his use of a text so remarkably close in proximity and manner to the *pericope de adultera*, of which he betrays no knowledge, is nothing short of astounding if the passage were known by either author or audience. So the early West shows no awareness of the passage, especially as belonging to the Gospel of John.

In sum, both the earliest and most universal witnesses manifest a striking absence of the *pericope de adultera* in the writings of the Early Church. The awareness of the story in the West and the defense of its inclusion in the Gospel of John starting in the fifth-century simply lack the weight and substance of the evidence against the passage as Johannine and original.

## 5. Marked Suspicious

Another argument against the authenticity of this passage is that it is found marked in multiple witnesses as suspicious. Up to this point, the external evidence is decidedly against the authenticity of the passage. As Plummer summarizes, “it is absent from the oldest representatives of every kind of evidence; Greek MSS., Versions, and Fathers both Greek and Latin.”<sup>74</sup> When it eventually finds its way into the Byzantine text, which later became a representative standard of the Greek New Testament in the Middle Ages (see above), it is found with marks of suspicion. One such mark is the *obelus* (pl. *obeli*), which is a

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<sup>73</sup> Cited by Hodges, 331: Ambrose, “Apologia David altera” (1.1, 3), in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. 32: *S. Ambrosii Opera*, Part 2, ed. Carolus Schenkl (Vindobonae: F. Tempsky, 1887), 359-60.

<sup>74</sup> Plummer, 363.

scribal notation used to mark a word or passage as spurious or doubtful. It is well documented that “many of the [manuscripts] which have the passage have asterisks or *obeli*, showing that the scribes knew the uncertainty of its status.”<sup>75</sup> Several later quality manuscripts contain the passage but have it marked by *obeli*, including: E, M, S, Λ, Π, Ω, 1424<sup>mg</sup>, pm<sup>270</sup>. Metzger comments, “Significantly enough, in many of the witnesses that 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.”<sup>76</sup>

In addition to *obeli*, scribal annotations of the text, called *scholium*, are found indicating the lack of historical support for the passage’s inclusion in the Gospel of John. It has been noted that “one scholium states that the Section was ‘not mentioned by the divine Fathers who interpreted [the Gospel], that is to say Chrysostom and Cyril, nor yet by Theodorus Mopsuestia and the rest’: according to another it was not in ‘the copies of (used by) Apollinaris’.”<sup>77</sup> In certain other Byzantine manuscripts, the passage is not copied but space is given after 7:52, “showing that the scribes were familiar with the section but that it was not in their exemplars.”<sup>78</sup>

The suspicion attached to this passage is unique in the New Testament. Of itself, this argument casts a shadow of doubt upon the supposition of Johannine originality, but when combined with all of the other external evidences it expectantly corroborates the case against it.

## 6. Variation in Location

Not only is the *pericope de adultera* absent in the finest Greek manuscripts, absent in some ancient versions of the Bible, absent in ancient lectionaries, and absent in the earliest commentators of the New Testament, when it is not absent it is sometimes found with marks of suspicion attached to it or it is found in different locations in the New Testament. As with the other arguments, it is of no small significance that this segment of text is found in various locations—no other passage in the New Testament bears this kind of behavior. “While most of the Greek MSS that include it set it in its present position, in the Ferrar group of cursives it follows Luke 21:38, in 225 it comes after John 7:36, in the Sinai Georgian MS 16 it follows 7:44, and a number of MSS, including the Armenian, set it after 21:25.”<sup>79</sup> “Most copyists apparently thought that it would interrupt John’s narrative least if it were inserted after 7:52 (D E (F) G H K M U Γ Π 28 700 892 al). Others placed it after 7:36 (ms. 225) or after 7:44 (several Georgian mss)<sup>4</sup> or after 21:25 (1 565 1076 1570 1582 arm) or after Lk 21:38 (f 13).”<sup>80</sup> With regard to its placement in Luke, Alford suggests that “the end of Luke 21 seems most to approve itself as the fitting place. But if it was the original one, it is totally inexplicable that we should find no trace of the fact there.”<sup>81</sup> The diverse variation seen in the placement of this passage, at the very least, suggests an unstable textual history. More overtly stated, these variations “point to an unstable tradition that was not originally part of an ecclesiastically accepted text.”<sup>82</sup>

## 7. Variation in Content

Not only is the *pericope de adultera* known for variation in location, it is also known for its variation in content. Plummer reports an “extraordinary number of various readings” (80 variants in 183 words).<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Beasley-Murray, 143.

<sup>76</sup> Metzger, 189.

<sup>77</sup> Westcott and Hort, 83.

<sup>78</sup> Burge, 142.

<sup>79</sup> Beasley-Murray, 143.

<sup>80</sup> Metzger, 188-89.

<sup>81</sup> Alford, Jn 7:53-8:11.

<sup>82</sup> Ridderbos, 286.

<sup>83</sup> Plummer, 182; Beasley-Murray, 143.

Westcott and Hort note that “the text of the Section itself varies much in the several documents which contain it.”<sup>84</sup> The content varies in size and substance. For example, in some versions of the story it describes what Jesus wrote on the ground. The most common version states, “Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground” (Jn 8:6). One version adds, “to declare their sins” (*Codex Edschmiadzin* 229), and another “the sins of each of them.”<sup>85</sup> Still another version expanded Christ’s response to the test with these words:

But he answered and said to them: 'In accordance with the law, whoever is pure and free from these sinful passions, and can bear witness with confidence and authority, as being under no blame in respect of this sin, let him bear witness against her, and let him first throw a stone at her, and then those that are after him, and she shall be stoned.'<sup>86</sup>

Many other such variants testify to this passage’s exceptional variation in content. Tenney explains that “its text contains a disproportionately large number of variants, which is generally a sure sign that it has received less than average care in transmission.”<sup>87</sup> Concerning Johannine originality, Morris adds, “The very large number of variants indicates that the textual history of this pericope is different from that of the fourth Gospel.”<sup>88</sup>

### Excised Due to Fear of Impunity?

The most popular reason given for the exceptional history of this passage is represented in Augustine’s original conjecture:

Some men of slight faith, or, rather, some hostile to true faith, fearing, as I believe, that liberty to sin with impunity is granted their wives, remove from their scriptural texts the account of our Lord’s pardon of the adulteress, as though he who said, “From now on, sin no more,” granted permission to sin.<sup>89</sup>

This has been championed since Augustine as the essential reason for the supposed excision of the passage. For instance, Hendriksen exemplifies many others when he writes:

Augustine has stated definitely that certain individuals had removed from their codices the section regarding the adulteress, because they feared that women would appeal to this story as an excuse for their infidelity. Closely connected with this is the fact that asceticism played an important role in the sub-apostolic age. Hence, the suggestion that the section (7:53–8:11) was at one time actually part of John’s Gospel but had been removed from it cannot be entirely dismissed.<sup>90</sup>

We must grant that “the ease with which Jesus forgave the adulteress was hard to reconcile with the stern penitential discipline in vogue in the early Church.”<sup>91</sup> But contained in this proposition is the very profundity of grace that thrust forth the power of the gospel in that world! Moreover, if this were original,

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<sup>84</sup> Westcott and Hort, 88.

<sup>85</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, 320.

<sup>86</sup> Found in bk. 8, ch. 7 of a work entitled *Historia Ecclesiastica* and attributed to Zachariah of Mitylene.

<sup>87</sup> Tenney, 137.

<sup>88</sup> Morris, 779.

<sup>89</sup> Joel C. Elowsky, *John 1-10*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT 4a (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 272.

<sup>90</sup> William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-2001), 2:35.

<sup>91</sup> Brown, 335.

“one would hardly expect so many early manuscripts to omit such an important story about Jesus were it in their text,”<sup>92</sup> whether or not it was found offensive.

The theory of excision on the ground moral prudence (i.e. ‘easy forgiveness’ and potential ‘impunity’) fails at several significant points. First, what about the woman at the well? Her sexual immorality (as a fornicator) was plainly evident and yet it is arguable that Christ dealt with her with even greater ease of forgiveness. What is significant is that that passage, John 4:7-26, is categorically different in its textual history; there is no question or dispute over its authenticity. Perhaps an even greater comparison is realized in the passage of Luke 7:36-50. There, “a woman of the city, who was a sinner,” violated cultural manners and customs when she (a) entered a Pharisee’s house and (b) initiated physical contact with a Rabbi (Jesus). She clearly bears the stigma of a woman who has committed sexual sin; some commentators classifier her as a prostitute. Simon plainly remarks, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner” (Lk 7:39). Jesus’ response is equally telling, “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Lk 7:47). Jesus does not condemn the woman but explicitly forgives her of her sin and commends her for her love; a detail not explicitly stated in the *pericope de adultera*. In this passage, Jesus does not even exhort the woman to “sin no more,” which would be more of a reason to exclude the text on the grounds of fear of impunity. Against this theory, there appears to be greater grounds for excision of the passage in Luke than the *pericope de adultera*, and yet there is no trace of any excision or question of authenticity for the passage in Luke.

Second, if in fact the *pericope de adultera* was excised on the ground of Christ’s interaction with the woman, then why would 7:53–8:2 be omitted along with the rest of the passage? If this passage were original to John, then surely these initial verses that establish the setting, identifying both the change and time of day as well as location, would not be excised along with the questionable content. The significance of these few preliminary verses between John 7:52 and 8:12 should not be ignored. At the very least they introduce the interval of a day into a context that otherwise assumes continuity of the same day. Again, if the passage were originally written in this place, then a satisfactory answer remains wanting concerning the absence of these first few verses. In other words, “no theory which appeals to moral or disciplinary prudence as the cause of omission, whether in the biblical text or in liturgical use, is competent to explain why the three preliminary verses (7:53; 8:1, 2), so important as apparently descriptive of the time and place at which all the discourses of c. 8 were spoken, should have been omitted with the rest.”<sup>93</sup> Moreover, why would these verses be kept intact with the paragraph wherever it is found? As the passage is found in various locations, so also are these introductory verses found, suggesting that the pericope has always been one complete and independent unit of narration.

Third, the principle of this theory is demonstrated nowhere else in the New Testament and betrays a precarious scribal discipline that is far too suggestive—especially in the Alexandrian tradition. Thus, “the hypothesis taken for granted by Augustine and Nicon, that the Section was omitted as liable to be understood in a sense too indulgent to adultery, finds no support either in the practice of scribes elsewhere or in Church History. The utmost license of the boldest transcribers never makes even a remote approach to the excision of a complete narrative from the Gospels.”<sup>94</sup> In addition to this, Alford contends that the

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<sup>92</sup> Keener, 735.

<sup>93</sup> Westcott and Hort, 86-7.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 86.

variation of so many distinct and independent texts argues against the theory that their origin is owing to an attempt to remove a matter of offence.

From these points, the theory of excision on the ground of moral prudence fails to stand.

## ARGUMENTS FROM INTERNAL EVIDENCE

Substantial arguments against the authenticity of the *pericope de adultera* are from within as well as from without. In addition to the arguments from external evidence, we find three categorical arguments from internal evidence. *Internal evidence* is data concerned with the vocabulary, linguistic style, and content of a passage. It is also concerned with how that content fits into the context of the surrounding content.

When considering internal evidences, it is important to keep in mind that textual, stylistic, and even contextual points of integration are analyzed among Greek manuscripts and not translations. Such an examination can hardly be performed using English (or other) translations of the underlying Greek text. Translations naturally normalize variations in the text, yielding a more apparent sense of continuity and flow than may be present in the text under assessment.

The three most substantial arguments against the authenticity of the *pericope de adultera* from internal evidence are as follows:

### 1. Differences in Vocabulary

While differences in vocabulary are never conclusive and should always be analyzed with prudence, nevertheless they do offer interesting points of comparison. Köstenberger notes that “fourteen out of eighty-two words used in this pericope (or 17 percent) are unique to John.” These words, which are not found elsewhere in the Gospel of John, are listed below:

- 8:1 *elaia*
- 8:2 *orthros*
- 8:3 *moicheia*
- 8:4 *autophōros, moicheuō*
- 8:6 *kupō, katagraphō*
- 8:7 *epimenō, anakypō, anamartētos*
- 8:8 *katakypō*
- 8:9 *presbyteros, kataleipō*
- 8:10 *anakypō (2x), katakrinō*
- 8:11 *katakrinō (2x)*

“The pattern is consistent: virtually every verse from 8:1–11 (the sole exception being 8:5) contains words found nowhere else in the Gospel (and, except for *presbyteros*, rarely or not at all in the other Johannine writings). Moreover, several other words occur only once or twice elsewhere in the Gospel.”<sup>95</sup> Köstenberger also rightfully maintains that a careful and balanced approach to any vocabulary study will include factors of unique context along with unique vocabulary. This is the only passage in John’s Gospel dealing with adultery and therefore it is expected to contain new terminology (at least the terms dealing with the subject of adultery).

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<sup>95</sup> Köstenberger, 245.



It has also been noted that “‘scribes’ appear only here, and its language is closer to that of the Synoptics.”<sup>96</sup> The phrase, “scribes and Pharisees,” while being completely foreign to John (except in this passage), is notoriously present in the Synoptics. This is one of the reasons that scholars consider its inclusion at the end of Luke 21 to be a more suitable fit.

The vocabulary of the passage is noticeably different from the remainder of the Gospel of John. While this is inconclusive evidence, when combined with the other evidences it more significantly suggests non-Johannine origin.

## 2. Differences in Linguistic Style

Similar to the analysis of vocabulary is that of linguistic style. Again, while not conclusive, it offers data for comparison and corroboration. Nevertheless, some scholars place a great deal of weight on this particular analysis. Brown asserts, “in general the style is not Johannine either in vocabulary or grammar. Stylistically, the story is more Lucan than Johannine.”<sup>97</sup> Carson explains that “even if someone should decide that the material is authentic, it would be very difficult to justify the view that the material is authentically Johannine: there are numerous expressions and constructions that are found nowhere in John, but which are characteristic of the Synoptic Gospels, Luke in particular.”<sup>98</sup> Plummer agrees: “The style is similar to the Synoptic Gospels, especially to S. Luke; and four inferior MSS. insert the passage at the end of Luke 21, the place in the history into which it fits best.”<sup>99</sup> Poythress concludes, “On the basis of a significant number of disconformities to the Johannine pattern (*de* at 8:5, 8:10, and 8:11[2], plus some ‘suspicious’ cases), we can confidently conclude that 7:53–8:11 does not derive from the Pattern-producer. When we take into account the external text-critical evidence, we can conclude that in fact 7:53–8:11 was not part of the autographic text.”<sup>100</sup> Meyer adds that there is “the entire absence of the Johannine *oun* (‘therefore’), and in its stead the constant recurrence of *de*.”<sup>101</sup> Burge describes this as “unconscious syntax” and says that it “stands out as well. Sentences are connected with *de* in the pericope (vv. 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11) and this is unparalleled in John (for every five uses of *de* in Matthew, John has two).”<sup>102</sup>

This argument is one that is largely inaccessible to the average student of Scripture. Stylistic comparisons are highly technical and demand a high degree of familiarity and interaction with the Greek text as well as the Greek language and linguistic patterns in general. This should not discourage us from carefully considering the labors of scholars.

## 3. Differences in Context

While all of the internal arguments require analysis at the level of the Greek text, this argument proves most evident in an English translation.

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<sup>96</sup> Keener, 735.

<sup>97</sup> Brown, 336.

<sup>98</sup> Carson, 333.

<sup>99</sup> Plummer, 181.

<sup>100</sup> Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Testing for Johannine Authorship by Examining the Use of Conjunctions,” *Westminster Theological Journal* Volume 46, 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1984), 362.

<sup>101</sup> Meyer, 2:2.

<sup>102</sup> Burge, 144.

It is interesting that some have argued in favor of the authenticity of this passage on contextual grounds. One author writes: “When a passage fits so well into the surrounding context as does this one, considerable weight must be given to its inclusion in the text.”<sup>103</sup> Another stated:

Whatever may be the textual problems associated with this passage—and Dr. Johnson has argued that they are by no means as insuperable as generally supposed—there is no overriding contextual problem. The story of the adulterous woman fits admirably into the controversy developed in John 1–12. When this fact is coupled with the possibility that John 7:53—8:11 may contain a genuine Johannine stylistic trait, the case for the authenticity of the *Pericope Adulterae* does not appear as improbable as most New Testament scholars have supposed.<sup>104</sup>

What is interesting about these types of statements is their vagueness—they do not support their claims exegetically. General statements will not do, and claiming that the passage “fits admirably into the controversy developed in John 1–12” is far too broad to furnish support for its inclusion at 7:52.

Some justify its placement on theological rather than textual grounds. Brown suggests that an “explanation for the localization of the story in the general context of John vii and viii can be found in the fact that it illustrates certain statements of Jesus in those chapters, for example, viii 15, ‘I pass judgment on no one’; viii 46, ‘Can any of you convict me of sin?’” He concedes that “while the story may be textually out of place, from a theological viewpoint it fits into the theme of judgment in ch. viii.”<sup>105</sup> Whether inserted as an illustration of 8:12 or 8:15, or to accentuate 8:46, these arguments fail to offer any solid ground for taking the passage as authentically original to this location in the Gospel of John.

Keener insightfully suggests that “scribes may have seen in this context an apt location for the pericope due to Jesus’ discussion of sin (8:21, 24, 34, 46); yet if this story originally did precede that discussion, it may seem curious that no allusion is made to it, in contrast to a somewhat less public event in 5:1-9 to which subsequent allusions appear (5:16,20; 7:21, 23).”<sup>106</sup>

Several contextual arguments may be advanced against the placement of the passage after John 7:52. The context of the latter part of John 7 is Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles (cf. 7:2, 10, 14). This is approximately six months before He returns to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast, which will ultimately serve to commence His crucifixion. James R. White contends that “the primary internal consideration, aside from issues of vocabulary and style, is to be found in the fact that John 7:52 and John 8: 12 ‘go together.’ The story of the woman taken in adultery interrupts the flow of the text and the events recorded by John regarding Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem (7:45-8:20).”<sup>107</sup>

First, 8:1 says that Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. The only time that Jesus is ever recorded as staying the night on the Mount of Olives is in the Synoptic Gospels during His passion week. Nowhere else is Jesus said to have stayed on the Mount of Olives. Secondly, nowhere else does Jesus go alone. In each of the instances of His retirement to the mount, Jesus’ disciples accompany Him (cf. Matt 24:3; 26:30; Mk 13:3; 14:26; Lk 22:39). This argument is only suggestive since (a) it is an argument from silence and (b) Lk 22:39 does note that it “was His custom” to go to the mount. Nevertheless, the narrative resembles the pattern of

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<sup>103</sup> Charles P. Baylis, “The Woman Caught in Adultery: A Test of Jesus as the Greater Prophet,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 146, 582 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989), 172.

<sup>104</sup> Allison A. Trites, “The Woman Taken in Adultery,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 131, 522 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974), 146.

<sup>105</sup> Brown, 336.

<sup>106</sup> Keener, 736.

<sup>107</sup> James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1995), 262.

the Passion Week and is altogether foreign to the Gospel of John (Jesus is never seen going to the Mount of Olives in the Gospel of John).

Second, 8:2 says that Jesus returned to the temple “early in the morning.” This is a very significant statement as it interposes a day in the surrounding context. If it is original, the extra day should make perfect sense, or at least have no effect on the narrative, but this is not the case. John 7:37 tells us that “On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.” If the narrative recorded in 8:12 and following was intended to be understood as occurring “on the last day of the feast, the great day,” then the interposition of 8:2 would directly interfere. In fact, this appears to be the case. It is well documented that there were two major symbols used during the Feast of Tabernacles: the pouring of the water and the ceremony of lights. These wonderfully correspond to the two profound statements of Christ as being the source of water (7:37) and the light (8:12). Christ’s statement in 8:12 naturally presents His second great claim in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles. If 8:2 is authentic, then by explicit mention of being “the last day” (7:37), Christ’s statement in 8:12 would no longer be in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles and would consequently lose a great deal of force. The context naturally suggests continuity in these statements that correspond to symbols celebrated at this particular feast: “Jesus having appropriated the type of the Rock, now appropriates that of the Pillar of Fire.”<sup>108</sup> If 8:12 occurred after the Feast of Tabernacles, this symbolic significance would be less than obvious. On the other hand, if 7:53–8:11 is removed, the narrative flows most naturally and explains the symbolism behind Christ’s words in 8:12.

Third, the continuity just mentioned is substantially required by the language of 8:12. It has rightly been said that “the true relation between the two passages is indicated by *palin oun* (‘again therefore’) in 8:12.”<sup>109</sup> These words simply do not make sense following the *pericope de adultera*. “That is what is indicated by the word again (*palin*, which is the first word in the Gk. text of 8:12): again he spoke to the people, still in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles.”<sup>110</sup> Whatever Jesus is saying in 8:12 it is an ‘again’ statement; one that serves as a second or subsequent address. There was no such address in 8:1-11, the last address was given in 7:37. Additionally, the inferential conjunction (*oun*: ‘therefore’) is best understood in view of 7:40-52 rather than 8:1-11. In 7:40-52 there was open dispute over the identity of Christ and His claims. It is most fitting for Him to cry out in 8:12 on the basis of that seen. It is unnatural and more difficult to explain why Jesus would cry out on the basis of 8:1-11; especially when the conversation immediately resumes to the subject of His identity (cf. 7:14-30). Moreover, there may be an implied irony, fairly common in John, in the juxtaposition of 7:52 and 8:12. In 7:52, the Pharisees confidently instruct Nicodemus to “Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” In typical Johannine style, Jesus immediately declares Himself to be the “light of the world” (8:12), an evident allusion to the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 9:1-2, “in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.” In particular, notice the references to ‘Galilee’, ‘light’, and ‘of the nations’ (i.e. ‘world’) all within a well-known messianic prophecy.

Fourth, 8:9 leaves Jesus alone with the woman, and yet 8:12-13 presumes a crowd is present as in 7:37 (cf. 7:40). To appeal to 8:2 as the audience is to plainly ignore the plain language of 8:9: “Jesus was left alone with the woman.” Beyond this is the difficulty that Jesus is still seen teaching in the temple in 8:20.

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<sup>108</sup> Plummer, 187.

<sup>109</sup> Westcott and Hort, 87.

<sup>110</sup> Carson, 337.

There is no break or explanation that could allow for such a drastic change in circumstances between 8:9, being left alone, and 8:20, teaching in the temple with plenty ready to arrest Him.

Fifth, 8:13 speaks only of Pharisees speaking to Jesus, which is customary for John but presents an unexplained and indecipherable switch from the context of 8:3. According to the last observation, there would be no Pharisees there to hear or respond to Jesus if 8:1-11 is inserted. If, however, it is removed, then the original context surfaces and all difficulties vanish.

Meyer calls it a “strange interruption” and argues that “it breaks up the unity of the account continued in 8:14 ff.; again by its tone and character, so closely resembling that of the synoptic history, to which, in particular, belongs the propounding of a question of law, in order to tempt Christ,—a thing which does not occur in John.”<sup>111</sup> Hengstenberg argues, “Nor is it without significance that the narrative interrupts the connection. Both before it and after it we have matter which directly refers to the question whether Jesus were the Christ, the Son of God.”<sup>112</sup> In short, “it seriously interrupts the flow of thought in John's narrative.”<sup>113</sup>

It is interesting to note that John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), in his verse-by-verse commentary on the Gospel, not only passes over the *pericope de adultera*, he frames his whole exposition on the contextual connections present between 7:52 and 8:12:

**[7:52]** “Search, and look: for out of Galilee hath arisen no prophet.” Why, what had the man said? that Christ was a prophet? No; he said, that He ought not to be slain unjudged; but they replied insolently, and as to one who knew nothing of the Scriptures; as though one had said, “Go, learn,” for this is the meaning of, “Search, and look.” What then did Christ? Since they were continually dwelling upon Galilee and “The Prophet,” to free all men from this erroneous suspicion, and to show that He was not one of the prophets, but the Master of the world, He said, **[8:12]** “I am the light of the world.” Not “of Galilee,” not of Palestine, nor of Judæa.<sup>114</sup>

In summary, Alford argues that “it has no connexion with the context and belongs, apparently, to another portion of our Lord's ministry.”<sup>115</sup>

## AUTHORSHIP AND AUTHORITY

The best evidence is clearly against the authenticity of the passage as Johannine. To be sure, “scholarship has, almost universally, regarded the pericope as a later insertion.”<sup>116</sup> When both the external and internal evidence is mounted, the case against the passage belonging to the original composition of the Gospel of John is almost certain. In other words, “when one adds to this impressive and diversified list of 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 8:12 ff., the case against its being of Johannine authorship appears to be conclusive.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Meyer, 2.

<sup>112</sup> Hengstenberg, 418.

<sup>113</sup> Keener, 736.

<sup>114</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. John,” in *NPNF* 14 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 187.

<sup>115</sup> Alford, Jn 7:53–8:11.

<sup>116</sup> Köstenberger, 247.

<sup>117</sup> Metzger, 188.

Does this mean that the passage is not historical? We may conclude with Plummer, “that the internal and external evidence when put together is overwhelmingly against the paragraph being part of the Fourth Gospel.”<sup>118</sup> “Nevertheless, the passage was known early, and the general conservative opinion of this portion is that it records an authentic incident in the life of Christ, although there is serious doubt whether John wrote it as part of his Gospel.”<sup>119</sup> “To say that it does not belong in the Gospel is not identical with rejecting it as unhistorical. Its coherence and spirit show that it was preserved from a very early time, and it accords well with the known character of Jesus. It may be accepted as historical truth; but based on the information we now have, it was probably not a part of the original text.”<sup>120</sup> Plummer persuasively argues that it is “difficult to see what, excepting its truth, can have caused its insertion.” Later, he concludes that “The question as to who is the author, cannot be answered. There is not sufficient material for a satisfactory conjecture, and mere guesswork is worthless. The extraordinary number of various readings (80 in 183 words) points to more than one source.”<sup>121</sup>

So from where did this passage originate? It appears to bear the testimony of an authentic piece of history that was later inserted in the Gospel of John, the origins of which, many suggest, come from oral tradition.

### The Question of Historicity

The majority of scholars who argue against the authenticity of the passage as original with John, also argue in favor of its historical veracity. Metzger, for instance, says, “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.”<sup>122</sup> In another place he adds, “The story of the woman taken in adultery, for example, has many earmarks of historical veracity; no ascetically minded monk would have invented a narrative that closes with what seems to be only a mild rebuke on Jesus’ part: ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.’”<sup>123</sup> Westcott and Hort conclude that “the argument which has always weighed most in its favour in modern times is its own internal character. The story itself has justly seemed to vouch for its own substantial truth, and the words in which it is clothed to harmonise with those of other Gospel narratives. These considerations are however independent of the question of Johannine authorship: they only suggest that the narrative had its origin within the circle of apostolic tradition.”<sup>124</sup> Meyer agrees, stating, “Its internal character, moreover, speaks in favour of its having originated in the early Christian age; for, although it is, indeed, quite alien to the Johannine mode of representation, and therefore not for a moment to be referred to an oral Johannine source (Luthardt), it is, nevertheless, entirely in keeping with the tone of the synoptical Gospels, and does not betray the slightest trace of being a later invention in favour either of a dogmatic or ecclesiastical interest.”<sup>125</sup> Brown notes that “there is nothing in the story itself or its language that would forbid us to think of it as an early story concerning Jesus.”<sup>126</sup> Carson plainly states that “there is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning

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<sup>118</sup> Plummer, 181.

<sup>119</sup> Kent, 132-3.

<sup>120</sup> Tenney, *EBC*, 89.

<sup>121</sup> Plummer, 181-2.

<sup>122</sup> Metzger, 188.

<sup>123</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, 319.

<sup>124</sup> Westcott and Hort, 87.

<sup>125</sup> Meyer, 2:1.

<sup>126</sup> Brown, 335.

belong to the canonical books.”<sup>127</sup> Ridderbos concurs and argues that “it is undoubtedly of ancient date and in content evinces the character of an authentic tradition, not that of a fictitious story.”<sup>128</sup> Tenney testifies that “even those who exclude it from the body of John on textual grounds admit that its tenor is wholly in keeping with the character and ministry of Jesus, and that it doubtless constitutes a genuine account of an episode of His career, though it may be misplaced.”<sup>129</sup> Morris expresses that “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.”<sup>130</sup> Harrison eloquently remarks, “The word of Jesus to the woman’s accusers has such an atmosphere of originality about it, and is so in agreement with the unexpected and searching character of remarks attributed to Him elsewhere, that we can hardly doubt the historicity of the event.”<sup>131</sup> White summarizes: “All of these things taken together make it a near certainty that this passage was not originally a part of the Gospel of John. Yet, the story itself is certainly in harmony with the ministry and teaching of the Lord Jesus. Most feel it was an early oral tradition that was popular primarily in the West and that it came to have a part in the Gospel of John over time.”<sup>132</sup>

### The Question of Inspiration

If the passage testifies to an historical episode in Jesus’ ministry passed down by oral tradition, does this mean that the written record was originally inspired of God? This begs the question of scriptural inspiration or *inscripturation*. “‘Inscripturation’ is the process by which God’s self-disclosure was committed to writing so that the resulting product can be accurately designated the Word of God. God’s revelation is said to be inscripturated in the biblical record.”<sup>133</sup> The problem with classifying the *pericope de adultera* as inspired of God is that does not belong originally to any of the inspired writings of the New Testament. Therefore, oral tradition or not, it stands alone as an independent unit of written text, without the sanction of written apostolic authority. Add to this the exceptional number of variants—line per line, this passage exhibits more variation than any segment of inspired text—and the whole matter of determining the original ‘inspired’ record is virtually hopeless. Instead, as a standalone passage, it more closely resembles other insertions of apocryphal nature. This does not necessarily preclude the historicity of the story, it simply disallows any dogmatic insistence that the written testimony we have today is authoritative in its retelling of the story—categorically opposite of inspired Scripture, which is fully reliable, inerrant, and infallible.

There are some interesting leads as to the source of the written story. Barrett notes that the story “is probably ancient. Eusebius (*H.E.*, III, xxxix, 16) sets it down that Papias ‘records another story also, about a woman, accused in the Lord’s presence of many sins, which is contained in the Gospel according to the Hebrews’. In our narrative the woman is accused of only one sin, but the correspondence is none the less fairly close.”<sup>134</sup> Burge also notes that “Eusebius (d. 340) speaks of a story related to him about Papias (c. 60–130). Papias knew a story of a woman who was maliciously accused before Jesus concerning her sins, and this was to have been recorded in the ‘Gospel according to the Hebrews.’ While the description is incomplete, the story is generally taken to be that of our Johannine pericope.” Later, he points out that

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<sup>127</sup> Carson, 333.

<sup>128</sup> Ridderbos, 286.

<sup>129</sup> Tenney, 138.

<sup>130</sup> Morris, 779.

<sup>131</sup> Harrison, 432.

<sup>132</sup> White, 262.

<sup>133</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 306.

<sup>134</sup> Barrett, 589; Morris 779.

“Lightfoot printed John 7:53–8:12 as a surviving fragment of Papias. See his *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Macmillan, 1907) 530.”<sup>135</sup>

### The Question of Canonicity

That the *pericope de adultera* may have come from an apocryphal ‘gospel’ raises our final question, which is whether the story is canonical or not. Westcott and Hort note that “the form of expression leaves it doubtful whether the Gospel according to the Hebrews was cited by Papias as his authority or mentioned independently by Eusebius: no other evidence of use of that Gospel by Papias occurs in our scanty information respecting him. If the Section was the narrative referred to by Eusebius, his language shews that he cannot have known it as part of the canonical Gospels.”<sup>136</sup>

Brown addresses the question as one of ecclesiastical tradition: “For some this question will have already been answered above, since in their view the fact that the story is a later addition to the Gospel and is not of Johannine origin means that it is not canonical Scripture (even though it may be an ancient and true story). For others canonicity is a question of traditional ecclesiastical acceptance and usage.” He goes on to explain:

Thus, in the Roman Catholic Church the criterion of canonicity is acceptance into the Vulgate, for the Church has used the Vulgate as its Bible for centuries. The story of the adulteress was accepted by Jerome, and so Catholics regard it as canonical. It also found its way into the received text of the Byzantine Church, and ultimately into the King James Bible. And so the majority of the non-Roman Christians also accept the story as Scripture.<sup>137</sup>

But canonicity is not a matter left to the determination of the church. God's word is inspired and thereby *self-attesting*, so each self-attested manuscript was received, recognized, and regularly used by the church, making the canon *self-establishing*.

Bruce rightly states, “Divine authority comes first: canonicity follows authority and is dependent upon it.”<sup>138</sup> Clearly the Scripture throughout the ages has been recognized by the people of God as their Lord's words; the canon was simply the codification of what the people of God recognized as coming from Him. Thus the source is not man, nor man's determination, rather the source is God. Van De Beek couches this understanding into the context of faith:

People did not say at a particular moment, ‘Come, let us choose a number of texts as a standard for our faith’. It is rather that their encounter with these texts shaped their faith, and that these texts therefore were authoritative for them. The texts thus precede the belief, which subsequently acknowledges that these are canonical texts. ‘So faith comes from what is heard’ (Rom 10:17), wrote Paul long ago.<sup>139</sup>

This is not merely an intellectual exercise; it does involve faith in the self-authenticating, self-disclosing, self-sufficient and only true God, who is sovereign over the events of history. By faith one believes and trusts that God is able and has providentially preserved and orchestrated the inclusion of exactly what He had predetermined to clearly communicate to His people—that is exactly what He wants them to have. As Metzger notes, “Despite the very human factors (the *confusio hominum*) in the production, preservation,

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<sup>135</sup> Burge, 143.

<sup>136</sup> Westcott and Hort, 84.

<sup>137</sup> Brown, 336.

<sup>138</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 19.

<sup>139</sup> A. Van De Beek, “Being Convinced: On the Foundations of the Christian Canon,” in *Canonization and Decanonization: Papers presented to the International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions, Held at Leiden 9–10 January 1997*, Studies in the History of Religions, ed. A. Van Der Kooij and K. Van Der Toorn (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1998), 336.

and collection of the books of the NT, the whole process can also be rightly characterized as the result of divine overruling in the *providential Dei*.<sup>140</sup> It is necessary then to appropriate faith and providence when evaluating the issue. This is echoed again by Robert Reymond:

the Christian must accept by faith that the church, under the providential guidance of God's Spirit, got the number and the 'list' right since God did not provide the church with a specific list of New Testament books. ... God's Spirit providentially led his church—imperceptively yet inexorably ... to adopt the twenty-seven documents that the Godhead had determined would serve as the foundation of the church's doctrinal teaching and thus bear infallible witness throughout the Christian era to the great objective central events of redemptive history, and that this 'apostolic tradition' *authenticated and established itself*...<sup>141</sup>

God is the source of the Scriptures, and therefore faith in God and trust in His care for His church leads us to the understanding that the authority of the Bible rests not in the minds of men, but rather in the very power of God.

Regarding the *pericope de adultera*, it should be noted that “from the third and fourth centuries it was tacitly or expressly excluded from the canonical text.”<sup>142</sup> It did not originally belong to any inspired text and itself was not recognized as an independent apostolic document inspired of God. Therefore, it cannot properly belong in the canon of Holy Scripture. Burge reminds us, “If our notion of canonical authority rests in the books of the Bible themselves—that is, in those literary units called gospels and epistles penned by inspired authoritative authors (so Irenaeus)—then our passage cannot be a part of the canon. The textual evidence confirms what a literary study only suggests: The passage is an insertion.” As for its existence in the King James Version and other translations based upon the Textus Receptus, it should be noted that “Erasmus doubted the originality of the passage but included it anyway in his celebrated text of 1516 due to its Latin popularity. From there it was carried into the seventeenth-century Textus Receptus.”<sup>143</sup> Likewise, it is reported that “Erasmus shewed by his language how little faith he had in its genuineness; but 'was unwilling', he says, 'to remove it from its place, because it was now everywhere received, especially among the Latins': and, having been once published in its accustomed place by him, it naturally held its ground as part of the 'Received Text'.”<sup>144</sup>

Thus, though Burge (1984: 148) may be right when he classifies the pericope as “an edifying *agraphon* of Jesus,” the fact remains that the account almost certainly was not part of the original Gospel and therefore should not be regarded as part of the Christian canon. Nor does inspiration extend to it. In principle, the pericope is no different from other possibly authentic sayings of Jesus that may be found in NT apocryphal literature.<sup>145</sup>

By reason of the evidences presented, we conclude that this passage, while bearing the mark of impressive antiquity, is not originally Johannine. Therefore, since it belongs to no other unit of text—and itself was not an independent unit of text—that was universally acknowledged in the canon of the NT, it is outside of the NT canon. If the *pericope de adultera* is not God-breathed, canonical Scripture, then it is categorically different from Scripture in authority.

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<sup>140</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (1987; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 285.

<sup>141</sup> Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 67.

<sup>142</sup> Meyer, 2:2.

<sup>143</sup> Burge, 148.

<sup>144</sup> Westcott and Hort, 88.

<sup>145</sup> Köstenberger, 248.



## ADDRESSING COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Several highly respected and capable commentators of Scripture have ardently argued for the authenticity of the *pericope de adultera*—out of which we trust were rightly motivated and God-honoring convictions.

With admirable transparency and heartfelt tension, J. C. Ryle expressed his position as follows: “It may seem almost presumptuous to offer any opinion on this very difficult subject. But I venture to make the following remarks, and to invite the reader's candid attention to them. . . . On the whole I think it safest to regard this disputed passage as genuine. At any rate I prefer the difficulties on this side to those on the other.”<sup>146</sup> Ryle lists several arguments in favor of the passage, which counter the arguments he lists against the passage. Each of his arguments are addressed in the material above. Due to the age of his writings and the change of circumstances, it may be appropriate to list Ryle's first objection, which effectively states: Against the argument that it is not found in some of the oldest and best manuscripts, it is found in many old manuscripts.<sup>147</sup>

A. W. Pink<sup>148</sup> argues in favor of the passage but only looks at internal evidence. In his efforts to defend the passage, he fails to deal with matters of context exegetically. He asserts, “‘Then spake Jesus again unto them’ (verse 12)—unto whom? Go back to the second half of John 7 and see if it furnishes any decisive answer. But give John 8:2 a place, and all is simple and plain.” But this plainly overlooks 8:9, where it states that “Jesus was left alone with the woman.” He raises question concerning the Pharisees, “But how came the Pharisees there? John 7:45 shows them elsewhere. But bring in John 8:1–11 and this difficulty vanishes, for John 8:2 shows that this was the day following.” First of all, he again overlooks 8:9, wherein the whole difficulty is shown to be against him rather than in his favor. Second, 7:45 does not require that the Pharisees are somewhere other than the temple. In fact, 7:32 explicitly shows the Pharisees in close proximity to the crowds, which would certainly be the case in 7:37–44. Also, the language of 8:12 suggests that Jesus was speaking in response to the dynamics occurring in the temple and shows the Pharisees readily available for discussion (8:13). In response to Pink's comment regarding “this was the day following,” see ‘Differences in Context’ above. Pink goes on to defend the passage by its theology and effectiveness in illustration. While attractive, these arguments are not exegetically sustainable. To conclude that the passage is inspired because it is morally sound and spiritually attractive while willfully ignoring all other factors is not an act of faith, it is an act of dogma. Pink asserts his conclusion with a somewhat condescending tone when he says, “The one who is led and taught by the Spirit of God need not waste valuable time examining ancient manuscripts for the purpose of discovering whether or not this portion of the Bible is really a part of God's own Word.” No degree of believing makes something true. We believe what is true independent of our belief. God has sufficiently revealed Himself in the texts of inspired Scripture and has preserved them sufficiently for our complete confidence. We need not deny objective evidence (against this passage) to have confidence in the reliability of our Bibles—indeed, the objective witness of the manuscript evidence strengthens our confidence.

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<sup>146</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John 7:1–10:30* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, reprint 2007), 66–67.

<sup>147</sup> He goes on to say, “if not in the very oldest and best,” but clearly this is no longer true. The original publication of Ryle's work was in 1860–79, being before the discovery of the most ancient and best quality extant manuscripts to date, which do not contain the *pericope de adultera* (see below).

<sup>148</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1923–45), 415–17.

A more recent publication that interacts fairly substantially with some of the technical manuscript data is a journal article by Zane Hodges.<sup>149</sup> While Hodges does not address the internal character of the *pericope de adultera* in this article, he does present several arguments concerning the manuscript case. In response to his theory, it should be noted that several necessary assumptions are at work in his argumentation. First, he presupposes that the passage was originally native to the Gospel of John and was excised. While external and internal evidence is lacking for this supposition, he builds his argument upon it—the very outcome to which he is pre-committed. Second, his argument assumes that the text of the New Testament went through a ‘hardening’ period, wherein a more lenient attitude toward modifying the text became overruled by a much more rigid position by the beginning of the third century. This is assumed without evidence and surely contradicts the advocacy of Augustine and Jerome to include the text. Third, he must assume that this hypothetical excision took place before the ‘hardening’ of the text, which he speculates was before the writing of Revelation. It seems that he is forced to drive the excision date so incredible far back because there is such early attestation against the passage. This forces a fourth assumption, namely a common ancestor that is “short of the original.” It has to be nearly as ancient as the original but yet short of it since he is suggesting that the omission is a corruption of the original. His hypothetical date places such excising activity into the period of living apostles, a supposition that is highly improbable. Lastly, Hodges hypothesizes the propagation of an excision from a single ancient exemplar. This, he claims, is the explanation for the universal silence on the passage in the first few centuries of manuscript evidence. In response, it is much more probable that the propagation of the passage has its origin in an insertion made into an ancient exemplar in the West—this comports more closely with the data.

Peter Ruckman confidently asserts, “Verses 1–11 have been rejected by all the members of the Alexandrian Cult, although their Bible revisions will include the passage to make money off a bunch of Christian suckers.”<sup>150</sup> We must not resort to such dogmatism on these issues; it is neither helpful nor edifying. First, see the section above concerning the Alexandrian textual family. Second, against the supposition stated by Ruckman and implied by Hodges, the witnesses that render this passage absent are early and diverse. The spectrum is significant, ranging from the *Caesarian* text type,<sup>151</sup> to the *Alexandrian* text type,<sup>152</sup> to the *Byzantine* text type,<sup>153</sup> and including the West<sup>154</sup> and mixed text types.<sup>155</sup>

The argument that is proposed by Augustine does not overcome the fact that both he and Jerome concede to well-known doubt concerning the passage. The very testimony of their advocacy demonstrates that they were advocating the positive inclusion of the passage rather than warning against the corruption of excision. Coupled with the general practice of the West to conflate and include even doubtful material, it is reasonable to conclude that these advocates from the West were voices of an exception and not a universal position. The West saw corruption of a text asymmetrically: including a questionable variant in transmission introduced less corruption than excluding one.

Arguments that have sought to minimize or discredit the evidence according to the finest surviving manuscripts appear to simply lack objective support.

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<sup>149</sup> Zane C. Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John Part 8: The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 136, 544 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979), 318-332.

<sup>150</sup> Peter Ruckman, *The Ruckman Reference Bible* (Pensacola, FL: BB Bookstore, 2009), 1398.

<sup>151</sup> MSS 157 (according to Streeter), 565 (“One of the most beautiful of all known manuscripts”, Metzger), and Θ.

<sup>152</sup> MSS p75, 8, B (“One of the most valuable of all the manuscripts of the Greek Bible is Codex Vaticanus”, Metzger), L, T, W, and 33 (“the queen of the cursives”).

<sup>153</sup> MSS A<sup>vid</sup>, N, X, Y, Δ, 1424, and 0211.

<sup>154</sup> Old Latin MSS.

<sup>155</sup> MSS p66, Ψ, 1241.

# Conclusions

An honest examination of both the external and internal evidences simply will not allow us to skirt the issue. The controlling thought of our hearts must be, “What did the original author write?” This exercise will demand of us a better understanding of the Bibles we hold. It will call us to a clearer trust in the Word of God—more patently trusting not in the hands of men to transcribe and translate, but in the hand of God to supernaturally inspire and providentially preserve. Part of that grand work of providential preservation is witnessed in the testimony of the multiplicity of surviving ancient manuscripts. These, which afford us the greatest degree of confidence in the precision of reconstructing the original New Testament, are a gift from God’s providential hand. It must be emphatically restated that no other passage in the whole of the Bible bears a history like this one. Finally, let us reemphasize that it is on the ground of a high view of Scripture that this passage must be classified as historical literature and not on par with Holy Writ.

## THE RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLE

Some may see this as bringing into question our whole orientation to Scripture. Our minds race to entertain thoughts like: *If this is not authentic, then what else is not? Is it only a matter of time before the next passage is debunked because of some new discovery? Who determines what is and what is not authentic?* We must understand that the vast repository of evidence reinforces the reliability of our NT canon. To this we must urge: it is for the very reasons why this text has been marked as suspicious that we have increasing confidence in the NT canon. The unprecedented extent of scrutiny applied to the manuscripts of the NT and its canon are compelling arguments in favor of the NT’s reliable representation of the original autographs. If the data were not so extensive, then this discussion would never have come to fruition. With regard to discovering other such problems, this is virtually impossible since the manuscript testimony is so early, extensive, and widely distributed that we have near certainty concerning the original writings of the apostles. This is why the study of textual variants is important. Without understanding the situation, the mere thought of calling into question a passage that is printed in our Bibles can be profoundly unsettling. But we must remember:

The study of textual variants has not left us in confusion about what the original manuscripts said. It has rather brought us extremely close to the content of those original manuscripts. For most practical purposes, then, the *current published scholarly texts* of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament *are the same as the original manuscripts*. Thus, when we say that the original manuscripts were inerrant, we are also implying that over 99 percent of the words in our present manuscripts are also inerrant, for they are exact copies of the originals. Furthermore, we *know* where the uncertain readings are.<sup>156</sup>

Again, the amazing wealth of ancient witnesses to the original texts of the NT is precisely the ground for questioning the *pericope de adultera*. The exceptional reliability of the Bible calls into question this passage. As a result of the rigorous and unprecedented scrutiny that the Scriptures have been subject to throughout the centuries, we have tremendous confidence in the reliability of our present Bible to represent the original inspired writings.

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<sup>156</sup> Grudem, 96. As this relates to the doctrine of inerrancy, Grudem goes on to say that “it is extremely important to affirm the inerrancy of the original documents, for the subsequent copies were made by men with no claim or guarantee by God that these copies would be perfect. But the original manuscripts are those to which the claims to be God’s very words apply. Thus, if we have mistakes in the copies (as we do), then these are only the *mistakes of men*.”

## The Testimony of Manuscript Evidence

The Bible is completely without peer, majestically towering over any and every other corpus of writings in ancient, medieval, and modern times. The NT is essentially incomparable in its number, antiquity, and quality of manuscripts witnessing to its original. Geisler notes:

The reliability of the NT is established because the number, date, and accuracy of its manuscripts enable reconstruction of the original text with more precision than any other ancient text. The number of NT manuscripts is overwhelming (almost 5,700 Greek manuscripts) compared with the typical book from antiquity (about 7 to 10 manuscripts; Homer's *Iliad* has the most at 643 manuscripts). The NT is simply the best textually supported book from the ancient world.<sup>157</sup>

The vast number of manuscripts is an astounding testimony to the unquestionable impact of the NT and the sovereign providence of God in preserving it. There is nothing that compares:

What we discover is that there are more extant New Testament manuscripts than any other document from antiquity. More than 24,000 partial and complete copies of the New Testament are in existence today. By comparison, the ancient document second in number of available copies is the *Iliad*, which has only 643 surviving manuscripts. And this number is extremely high compared to other ancient documents. For example, the *History of Thucydides*, the *History of Herodotus*, Caesar's *Gallic War*, Tacitus' *Histories* and *Annals*, and many other ancient documents have fewer than two dozen surviving copies.<sup>158</sup>

Not only is the number of witnesses overwhelmingly and uniquely large, but their antiquity is second to none. For instance, there are only 8 copies of Thucydides' *History* (460-400 B.C.) and the earliest of them is dated ca. A.D. 900—that is a span of nearly 1,300 years. Plato's *Tetralogies* (427-347 B.C.) has only 7 extant copies, the earliest of which dates ca. A.D. 900 (1,200 year gap). There exists approximately 49 copies of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), dating at the earliest to A.D. 1100 (1,400 year gap). There are only 10 copies of the writings of Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.) and the earliest of them is dated ca. A.D. 900 (1,000 year gap). Even the earliest extant copies (only 20 in number) of the famous Roman historian, Tacitus (ca. A.D. 100), are approximately 1,000 years removed (ca. A.D. 1100). This is compared with the writings of the NT dating as early as A.D. 117, being only 25 to 50 years after the original autographs! This is widely recognized among textual scholars of ancient literature as remarkable. The renowned paleographer and classical scholar, Sir Frederic Kenyon (1863-1952), plainly stated:

The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the *authenticity* and the *general integrity* of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.<sup>159</sup>

Again, this condition is unique among ancient writings, and avails substantial and clearly providential benefit:

Furthermore, it must be said that the span of time between the original composition and the next surviving manuscript is far less for the NT than for any other work in Greek literature. The lapse for

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<sup>157</sup> Norman Geisler, "Has the Bible Been Accurately Copied Down Through the Centuries?" in *The Apologetics Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), 468.

<sup>158</sup> Dan Story, *Defending Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), 38.

<sup>159</sup> Sir Frederic Kenyon (1940), quoted in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 322.

most classical Greek works is about eight hundred to a thousand years, whereas the lapse for many books in the NT is around one hundred years. Because of the abundant wealth of manuscripts and because several of the manuscripts are dated in the early centuries of the church, NT textual scholars have a great advantage over classical textual scholars. The NT scholars have the resources to reconstruct the original text of the NT with great accuracy<sup>160</sup>

The weight of the evidence is multiplied when each of these factors are taken together. There is no more reliable representation of any ancient text than the NT. The sheer number, antiquity, and quality of documents representing the NT simply demand a category all its own.

Not only are there more and earlier NT manuscripts, but also they were more accurately copied than other ancient texts. The NT scholar and Princeton professor Bruce Metzger made a comparison of the NT with the *Iliad* of Homer and the *Mahabharata* of Hinduism. He found the text of the latter to represent only 90 percent of the original (with 10 percent textual corruption), the *Iliad* to be 95 percent pure, and only half of 1 percent of the NT text to remain in doubt. The Greek scholar A. T. Robertson estimated that NT textual concerns have to do with only a “thousandth part of the entire text,” placing the accuracy of the NT text at 99.9 percent—the best known for any book from the ancient world. Sir Frederick Kenyon noted that “the number of [manuscripts] of the NT, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the older writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or the other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world.” In summary, the vast number, early dates, and unmatched accuracy of the OT and NT manuscript copies establish the Bible’s reliability well beyond that of any other ancient book.<sup>161</sup>

How does this relate to the discussion of the *pericope de adultera*? Quite simply it guards from uninformed skepticism, ridicule, and doubt. The authenticity of the passage has been called into question because the reliability of the NT is so extensively defensible. Again, far from opposing the reliability of the NT, the scientific principles of textual criticism have only strengthened the case for the accuracy of the remaining content of the Bible. Accordingly, “careful application of these principles allows a high level of confidence that close access to the original texts does indeed exist. Moreover, ordinary English readers should not suppose that there are hundreds of significant textual variants whose existence is known only to specialized scholars . . . Looking through those footnotes will show a reader that the significant variants affect far less than 1 percent of the words of the . . . text, and even among that 1 percent, there are no variants that would change any point of doctrine.”<sup>162</sup> Daniel Wallace notes that “far more than 99 percent of the words in the English NT [are without variant, which provides] a high degree of confidence that the words in [the] English translation accurately represent the words of the NT as they were originally written. . . . The modern English translations accurately represent what the original authors wrote, and therefore these translations can be trusted as reproducing the very words of God.”<sup>163</sup> The distinguished church historian and chairman of the American Committee of the Revisers, Philip Schaff, writes:

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<sup>160</sup> *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), s.v. “Textual Criticism.”

<sup>161</sup> Geisler, 469.

<sup>162</sup> Paul Wegner, “The Reliability of the Old Testament Manuscripts,” in *Understanding Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012), 108-9.

<sup>163</sup> Daniel Wallace, “The Reliability of the New Testament Manuscripts,” in *Understanding Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012), 117.

This multitude of various readings of the Greek text need not puzzle or alarm any Christian. It is the natural result of the great wealth of our documentary resources; it is a testimony to the immense importance of the New Testament; it does not affect, but it rather insures, the integrity of the text; and it is a useful stimulus to study. Only about 400 of the 100,000 or 150,000 variations materially affect the sense. Of these, again, not more than about fifty are really important for some reason or other; and even of these fifty not one affects an article of faith or a precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other and undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of Scripture teaching.<sup>164</sup>

Even if a small segment of tradition has found its way into the collection of sacred texts, it is remarkable to note just how small the text deviates from the oldest extant witnesses. Despite possible first impressions, the overall transmission of the texts of Scripture bears an astoundingly insignificant variation. The combined accuracy of the manuscripts handed down through the centuries and millennia frankly demonstrates an unprecedented quality of transmission.

Lastly, we might note that no book has been more widely attacked in the history of humanity than the Bible, and yet it stands tall throughout the ages as a beaming testimony of divine truth. It has been attacked at times with vehement passion, against its accuracy, its historicity, its origin, its purpose, and its reliability. In approximately A.D. 300, the Roman emperor, Diocletian, ordered all of the manuscripts of the NT to be burned. Only a short 25 years later, Constantine, the new emperor, ordered that 50 “perfect copies” of the NT be produced and preserved under Roman authority and funding. The Bible will withstand the most threatening assaults of man because it is not merely a collection of ancient writings of men—it is the written Word of the living God and is, therefore, entirely reliable.

In summary, may we remember that the evidence that points out variants is also the evidence that provides objective grounds for confidence that God has substantively preserved His originally written Word for His glory and our greatest good. An honest examination of the evidence should only enrich our perspective of the reliability of the NT:

Through the centuries, tens of thousands of copies and thousands of translations have been made (transmission) which did introduce some error. Because there is an abundance of existing ancient OT and NT manuscripts, however, the exacting science of textual criticism has been able to reclaim the content of the original writings (revelation and inspiration) to the extreme degree of 99.99 percent, with the remaining one hundredth of one percent having no effect on its content (preservation). The sacred book which we read, study, obey, and preach deserves to unreservedly be called The Bible or “The Book without peer,” since its author is God and it bears the qualities of total truth and complete trustworthiness as also characterizes its divine source.<sup>165</sup>

## A HIGH VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

A high view of Scripture will tend to promote one of two categorical responses: (a) despite the evidence, excluding the passage can do damage to basic trust in Scripture; or (b) in light of the evidence, excluding the passage can demonstrate the trustworthiness of the remainder of Scripture. The first takes on an inclusivist (i.e. when in doubt include the text) approach while the second takes on a minimalist (i.e. when in doubt exclude the text) approach. In the end, the more technically conservative approach is (b). It should serve to promote within us an emboldened confidence that the vast percentage of text that we have in our

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<sup>164</sup> Quoted by Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1993), 1:87-88.

<sup>165</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), xxii.

Bibles today is beyond the shadow of a doubt, truly representative of authentically God-breathed Scripture. Thus, Köstenberger concludes, “though it may be possible to derive a certain degree of edification from the study of this pericope, proper conservatism and caution suggest that the passage be omitted from preaching in the churches.”<sup>166</sup> Hengstenberg more aggressively asserts that including the passage may “awaken mistrust” in the Scriptures. He argues in response to liberal critics who point to such an example to undermine the reliability of the Scriptures to reflect the original writings. He goes on to say, “It is the mistake of an unscientific and partial criticism, to say that our narrative was 'a morsel of oral tradition, which had an actual fact in our Saviour’s life for a foundation.' There is but one plain alternative: either John’s authorship, or a symbolical fiction which sought to gain authority by obtaining insertion in the Gospel of John.”<sup>167</sup>

Finally, it is to be remembered that the Word of God has never been determined by the mere partiality of man. We do not include or exclude text on the ground of preference. While we may have strong affinities toward the character and spiritual nature of this beautiful story, nevertheless we cannot assert its originality on the basis of our affinities. As for arguing for its authenticity on the basis of it being providentially included in our English Bibles, we must counter with the providential preservation of data that exposes its true origins. The providence of its place in transmission does not overthrow the evidence against its originality. The nature of this argument looks to tradition, even the tradition of the *Textus Receptus*. We are not more faithful to God by treating traditions as equal to His holy revelation. The true Word of God must stand as completely ‘other’ in relation to all other ancient writings. Our faith is founded upon more than tradition, it is founded upon the true and inspired Word of God.

### **SHOULD THIS PASSAGE BE PREACHED?**

We have sought to answer the questions: Does it belong in John? Is it inspired? Does it belong in the canon of Scripture? Now, allow me to personally address the question: Should we preach it?

In approaching this text through our verse-by-verse exposition of the Gospel of John, I found myself trapped in a corner. On the one hand, I feared the effects that this information may have on my beloved congregation. I was concerned for their hearts, their emotions, their faith. I wanted to avoid the subject altogether, to redirect their attention, to skirt the issue out of a (weak) desire to obviate all of the difficulties associated with this subject, and thus make it easier for them and me. But I quickly realized that entertaining these thoughts was only a sad commentary on my lack of faith in God. On the other hand, I feared God. First, I feared uttering one syllable of inaccuracy. I trembled at the thought of representing the majestic truth of God’s holy and precious Word before His people in a way that would dishonor Him and cast doubt upon even one letter of His Holy Writ. Second, my conscience would not allow me to preach from the sacred desk—set apart for the preaching of God’s holy Word—a text which I was compelled to doubt concerning its authenticity. The evidences, both internal and external, were far too plain for me to pretend that I was ignorant of the case. My conscience was tender to the utter holiness of God’s inspired Word, and would not let go of the thought that this small piece of text did not belong in the place it is printed. If it did not belong in its most frequently occurring location, then could I be sure that it is inspired of God? How could I preach a text with the transparent authenticity of conviction that I strive for in every other study of Scripture, when there was no authentic conviction? Moreover, what impression would I be making upon the hearts and minds of the dear ones I love, whom I seek to shepherd? If I preached the text

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<sup>166</sup> Köstenberger, 248.

<sup>167</sup> Hengstenberg, 419-20.

just as I would preach any other text, then surely there could be little difference between this piece and others. I was convinced that the authority that is rightly appointed to preaching Scripture was to be guarded and exclusively reserved for the preaching of inspired Scripture; lest authority be abused. Furthermore, I could not go against conscience. Thus, I refused to preach this text. My sincere prayer is that my actions would not be the cause of stumbling or discouragement, but rather the cause of accentuating the esteem of God's inspired text as categorically above any and all possible writings of men—tradition or not. I pray that the faithful would be strengthened in the knowledge that evidence exceedingly abounds for the rest of the texts printed in our Bibles.<sup>168</sup> The Bible that we hold in our hands is astoundingly precise in its representation of the original autographs penned not “by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pe 1:21). In the end, I pray that treating this text different would underscore just how different and holy Scripture truly is, to the praise and glory of God.

*Sola Scriptura!*

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<sup>168</sup> With the only other material exception being found in Mark 16:9-20.