

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THE PERICOPE ADULTERAE:
AN EXEGETICAL EXAMINATION
OF THE CANONICITY AND MEANING OF JOHN 7:53-8:11

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO
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I. Summary and Outline

Identification of Passage: John 7:53-8:11

[[but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."]]

Summary of Passage: John 7:53-8:11

John 7:53-8:11 is a story about adultery and judgment that transcends time. After the leading scribes bring a woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus shows how we are to forgive.

Outline of Passage: John 7:53-8:11

- I. Lord of the Situation: The Teacher (7:53-8:2)
 - a. Humble
 - b. Accessible
 - c. Knowledgeable
- II. Lord of the Law: The Trap (vv. 4-9)
 - a. Man's interpretation (vv. 4-6)
 - b. To Test Jesus (v. 6)
 - c. The Law Deals with People and God (vv. 7-9)
- III. Lord of Grace: The Trial (vv. 10-11)
 - a. Man cannot condemn and judge
 - b. Jesus did not come to condemn (although he is Judge)
 - c. Grace is given
 - d. Grace realized leads to purity

II. Introduction

There are many sections of Scripture where Jesus gives great wisdom and insight into a life entrusted to God. Unlike many other parts of Scripture, few are as hotly debated, and contested, as the story of the “woman caught in adultery” from John 7:53-8:11, traditionally known as the *pericope adulterae*.¹ At this point in scholarly history, most who have studied the *pericope*, would agree that this section of John was not in the original text, and most modern day English translations place this section parenthetically, or “relegate it to a footnote.”² Before any discussion, or exegetical work, is to take place on John 7:53-8:11, it is imperative that the proper questions are asked and addressed as to the contextual nature of this passage. While all Scripture is “profitable for reproof, correction, and training,” the question of whether the story of the woman caught in adultery is Scripture is worth examination (1 Timothy 3:16).³ If it is not found to truly be inspired Scripture, how can it be used for reproof or correction at all?

While most scholars do agree the story of the woman caught in adultery was probably not part of the original Johannian text, they also tend to agree “the story is a truly ancient one with all the earmarks of an authentic incident from Jesus' life,” and also poses no threat to any doctrinal issues in any other parts of Scripture.⁴ The *pericope* deals with many sound principles, and begins with an examination of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day. While searching for a way to discredit Jesus, they attempt to test him. Jesus, knowing their schemes, then turns the situation around and shocks all by not condemning the woman caught in sin, but calling out the

¹ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006; 2006), Jn 7:53.

² D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introductory to the New Testament*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 273.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are quoted from the ESV translation. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (ESV)* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2007).

⁴ Frances Taylor Gench, “John 7:53-8:11,” *Interpretation* (Academic OneFile) 63, no. 4 (October 2009): 398.

sin of those who brought her to Jesus in the first place. This paper will discuss the contextual issues surrounding John 7:53-8:11, asking the proper questions as to its canonicity, while examining the exegetical usefulness of the story itself.

III. Textual Problems and Questions of Canonicity

Before using the *pericope adulterae* for reproof and teaching, an objective examination must take place to answer questions of its canonicity, and thus whether it is actually inspired Scripture. This passage has traditionally been very difficult to interpret contextually based on omissions from the early manuscripts and lack of commentary from early church fathers.⁵ Many believed the early church fathers did not refer to the passage because they were “fearful of encouraging the committing of the crime,” but context is difficult if there is none.⁶ If the *pericope* is not inspired Scripture, even if it is an authentic historical event, it should not be used in the same manner as Scripture. Although the editors and scribes played an extremely important role in giving us the word of God when it could not be easily reproduced as it is today, they were not inspired by the Holy Spirit as the Biblical authors were. Only the original authors “had the insight under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to select, arrange, and adapt the works and words of Jesus.”⁷

Textual Criticism of the Passage

Today, it would be difficult to ignore the overwhelming evidence supporting a non-canonical view of the *pericope*, but first and foremost one must look to the textual criticism formulated from centuries of study on this topic. Scholars, who rarely agree to a high level such

⁵ Charles P. Baylis, "The Woman Caught in Adultery: A Test of Jesus as the Greater Prophet," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (The American Theological Library Association Series), April-June 1989: 171-183.

⁶ S. T. Bloomfield, *The Greek Testament*, Vol. 2, 2 vols. (London, England: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1839), 1440.

⁷ Robert James Dr. Utley, vol. Volume 4, *The Beloved Disciple's Memoirs and Letters: The Gospel of John, I, II, and III John*, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 1999), 78.

as with the *pericope*, have stated "despite the best efforts . . . to prove that this narrative was originally part of John's Gospel, the evidence is against [them], 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)."⁸ Even going back almost 50 years, Bruce Metzger stated, "the evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the periscope of the adulteress is overwhelming," and Metzger, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary who earned a PhD in Greek Gospel Lectionary, was well accepted at the time as a leader in Greek New Testament scholarship.⁹

Even in today's 21st Century interpretations of the *pericope* it is widely held that this passage was never a part of the original Greek manuscripts. Evidence shows the earliest known occurrence of the John passage to be around the third century, but the *pericope* is "absent from virtually all Greek manuscripts."¹⁰ The earliest dated manuscripts come from a fragment in papyrus P⁵², dated from around A.D. 130, and only contains a few words from John 18, but P⁶⁶ "includes most of John 1-14" and dates to the second century. Others include the papyrus P⁶⁵, which dates from the early third century, P⁷⁵ (third century), and then from the uncials "Ⲛ (fourth century), B (fourth century), [and they are also] probably absent from A and C."¹¹ Uncials A and C are "damaged at this point in John, but when the surviving leaves of the manuscript are measured there is no room for this passage," and the later Greek manuscripts that did include the *pericope* did so by notating the text with a special sign or obeli to show it was not original to John.¹²

⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 333.

⁹ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 1st Edition (Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1971), 219.

¹⁰ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introductory to the New Testament*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 273.

¹¹ Robert James Dr. Utley, 80.

¹² Ibid.

Even though John probably did not author the story, it was included in the codex D (sixth century), later editions of the Peshitta (fifth to sixth century), and more importantly for today's Catholics, the Vulgate (fourth century).¹³ Catholics centuries ago, and even to this day, have accepted the *pericope adulterae* as having God's authority regardless if a scribe added the text a few hundred years after John wrote his gospel, specifically because it was included in the Vulgate, and later the *versio vulgata* (13th century).¹⁴

Questions the Passage Should Answer

With no evidence of the *pericope* appearing prior to the third century, questions must then be asked as to whether it should be today, or should have been centuries ago, included in the English canon translations? Was this section written by John, is it historically accurate, and why is the *pericope* placed prior to John 8:12? For the most part, these questions are answered by the previous two paragraphs. If no Greek manuscripts prior to the third century include the passage, then logically it is reasonable to say John did not write the *pericope*, but traditionally that is not evidence enough for some to exclude the passage.

As to whether the passage is ancient, or historically accurate having actually taken place, most scholars will say this event, even though absent from the best manuscripts, "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."¹⁵ If this is historical as most believe, and the *pericope* is a passage included in the canon text early on but not written by the original author, it is an extremely rare "extrabiblical authentic tradition about Jesus," and one which John perhaps

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, , *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, 1st Edition, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1983), 346.

¹⁵ Ted Cabal, Chad Owen Brand, E. Ray Clendenen et al., *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), 1587.

alluded to in John 21:25.¹⁶ Even if one could justify the historical nature of the passage, it would be very difficult to claim the text as having been authored by John because it “includes numerous expressions and constructions that are found nowhere in John,” and stylistically it is more characteristic of the Synoptic Gospels, “Luke in particular.”¹⁷ When looking at the Greek word by word, there are several words and phrases not found in any Gospel, but there are many of the compound words and phrases, which are found in Luke.¹⁸

As far as placement in the text prior to John 8:12 is concerned, some scholars believe it was placed there, and has remained there in modern day English translations, because it related “well to two statements of Jesus in chapter 8,” one on judgment (8:15), and the other on guilt and sin (8:46).¹⁹ Once this text started to appear however it floated around in various different places such as three different places in John, after 7:36, 7:44, and 21:25, and then in one manuscript in Luke after 21:38.²⁰ With the text found in several different places, it tends to “confirm the inauthenticity of the verses,” and it makes it almost impossible to argue for Johannine authorship.

Problems with Authority and Doctrine

The final question to be asked of an extrabiblical passage is one of reliability, and authority of doctrine. If the passage in John was not written by John, and should probably not have been included in the English translations of the New Testament, how does this effect the inerrant doctrine of the New Testament? Textual criticism has answered this question partly in sheer number of manuscripts available. There are 322 uncial texts, 2,907 minuscule texts, 2,445 lectionary portions, and 127 papyri, almost 6,000 in total, preserved around the world, providing

¹⁶ Walvoord and Zuck, 346.

¹⁷ Carson and Moo, 274.

¹⁸ Henry J. Cadbury, “A Possible Case of Lukan Authorship (John 7 53-8 11),” *The Harvard Theological Review* (Cambridge University Press) 10, no. 3 (July 1917): 237-244.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 347.

²⁰ Metzger, 219-222.

a very large number of handwritten and transcribed “editions” of the New Testament.²¹ This provided for a large number of variations of Scripture, but the more variations we have available the more it also gave way to a mathematical accuracy.

F.F. Bruce wrote on the reliability of the New Testament and said, “if the great number of manuscripts increases the number of scribal errors, it increases proportionately the means of correcting such errors, so that the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is . . . in truth remarkably small.”²² With this many manuscript variations, and the accuracy of these variations at such a high level, there are very few passages, an extremely small number of texts, where critics truly question the reliability of the manuscripts. The *pericope adulterae* is one of them.²³ Though the variants in question are few, all of them, such as the *pericope*, if they were collectively left out of Scripture all together, would make no change to the doctrine or errancy of Scripture. Again, Bruce remarks that the “variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affects no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice.”²⁴

It has been shown that scholarship in general, is in agreement about the authorship of the *pericope* coming from some source other than John. The likelihood of the text’s arrival comes from being added by a scribe at a much later date, and it’s inclusion in the canon notated with an asterisk when it was included. Although the *pericope* does not affect the inerrancy or authority

²¹ The total number of manuscripts comes from the Institute for New Testament Textual Research in Muenster, Germany, also considered the most authoritative collection of such data in the world. The Institute for New Testament Textual Research (INTF), *Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung, INTF*, http://egora.uni-muenster.de/intf/index_en.shtml, referenced from John Piper, “Neither Do I Condemn You,” *Desiring God*, March 6, 2011 <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/neither-do-i-condemn-you--3> (accessed April 20, 2012).

²² F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 6th Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 14.

²³ Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide To Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 301.

²⁴ F. F. Bruce, 14-15.

of Scripture, the question still remains as to how we are to interpret a passage like this, who's context is unclear, or even unknown? Some have chosen "not to comment on this passage because [they] do not believe it is from the pen of John and, therefore, not inspired (even if historical), but there are other ways to use the *pericope* for teaching, interpretation, and an exegetical examination.²⁵ The best alternative to a proper examination of John 7:53-8:11 is to show that the *pericope* is "true on the basis of other parts of Scripture, and so let this story not be the basis of our authority," but instead to point to the authority of the Scriptures and what they teach.²⁶ By using the *pericope* passage for teaching and reproof in this manner, one can stay true to the overall Biblical canon, while still learning from an important historical passage, without altering any known doctrine.

IV. Context of John 7:53-8:11

Authorship Context of Passage

The authorship of the Gospel of John as a whole is not explicitly stated within the text itself, but neither is authorship stated as such in any of the gospels. For confirmation the Apostle John is indeed the writer of the Fourth Gospel we examine the numerous pieces of internal and external evidence available. Internal evidence is apparent through "following a chain of connections" throughout the Fourth Gospel starting with use of "the disciple" in 21:24, and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" in 21:7.²⁷ External evidence comes from the known authorship of the early church, mainly Polycarp (ca. A.D. 69), who "spoke of his contact with John," and Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 130).²⁸ Tradition was apparently passed on first hand from Polycarp to

²⁵ Robert James Dr. Utley, 81.

²⁶ John Piper, "Neither Do I Condemn You".

²⁷ Walvoord and Zuck, 267.

²⁸ Ibid.

Irenaeus that "John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, had himself published a Gospel during his residence in Ephesus in Asia."²⁹

Although the support for Johannian authorship is well established, the authorship specifically pertaining to the *pericope adulterae*, as stated in the previous sections, is highly questioned, even by the most conservative theologians. There is in fact more evidence supporting a style and grammar, which more closely resembles that of Luke than of John. Cadbury's conclusions on authorship in the "Harvard Theological Review" state one of two possibilities: "either (1) the *pericope adulterae* is an original part of Luke's Gospel and was omitted without leaving any appreciable trace in the MS. tradition of that Gospel, or (2) it is written by another than the third evangelist in a style that completely matches his Own."³⁰ In reference to Cadbury's second option, there are many possibilities including a translator or a scribe, or even an author from a western influence who then translated the *pericope* from Latin into Greek instead of Greek into Latin.³¹

Additional information about authorship is provided by fragments found in the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, and the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a "Greek document written in Syria, probably near the beginning of the third century."³² Fragments from these two documents, written by Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor (ca. third century), and Didymus the Blind (late fourth century) respectively, relate a very similar story to the *pericope*, one either author could very well have received through oral tradition, which continued to circulate at the time. The stories are not completely identical in nature where Papias relates an account of a woman "caught in sin rather than adultery," and the Didymus comes in the form of an encouragement to the bishops to "welcome

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Vol. III, V vols. (c. 180), 3:1.

³⁰ Henry J. Cadbury, 243-244.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

³² Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd Edition, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 304-305. This edition was translated and edited by Michael W. Holmes after the earlier version by J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer.

repentant sinners back into the congregation.”³³ Of the evidence examined on authorship, no definitive conclusions can be made, but the research does not allow a reasonable conclusion where John, the son of Zebedee, was the author of the *pericope adulterae*.

Literary Context of the Passage

One reason the *pericope* has received so much attention, as it relates to the traditional canon, is how the flow and thoughts of the passage fit in with the surrounding text in John. In an examination of the context of the pericope, one must look at how the passage flows within the entire Gospel, and how it fits within the sections immediately before and after the text. When looking at the overall context of John, the Prologue sets John’s gospel apart from the Synoptic Gospels, but John purpose for writing this account is clearly stated to be “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life” (20:30-31). Within this stated purpose there are three main sections of John plus an introduction and conclusion: Jesus’ Manifestation to the Nation (1:19-12:50), Jesus’ Preparation of His Disciples (13-17), and Jesus’ Passion and Resurrection (18-20).³⁴ Overall, the *pericope* does not fit contextually within the three larger sections, and when looking at John’s overall purpose for writing, the *pericope*, while good instruction, does not specifically fall within the stated purpose.

The *pericope* passage resides within the first section as stated above, which incorporates Jesus’ return to Jerusalem and the resumption of hostilities surrounding the Feast of Tabernacles (7:10-10:42). While the passage was most likely included in John in the very place it was because it fit well between John 7:52 and 8:12, the passage itself, if left out entirely, flows very well from 7:37-52 into 8:12. The sections just prior to and immediately after the *pericope* seem to be a continuation of Jesus’ teaching, which leads into the light of the world discourse and

³³ Ibid., 304.

³⁴ Walvoord and Zuck, 270-271.

“interrupts the sequence” between 7:52 and 8:12.³⁵ There is a very natural flow from 7:52 to 8:12, where in 8:12 John states “again Jesus spoke to them saying,” which denotes a continuation from a previous text, one that does not fit well when looking at the ending of 8:11.

V. Content of John 7:53-8:11

The content of the *pericope* can be viewed in three different sections, the teacher (7:53-8:3), the trap (vv. 4-9), and the trial (10-11). In the first section we see Jesus presented as the Lord over the situation, as the knowledgeable Teacher, something confirmed all through the New Testament, and many places in John, such as in John 3:2, but this type of teaching is commonly written about Jesus in many other places as well (cf. Matthew 5:1 and Luke 4:20).

The story quickly turns to the local teachers of the law trying to catch Jesus in a trap by presenting him with a test from Deuteronomy 19:10, which will contradict the law of Moses found in Deuteronomy 22:22 and Leviticus 20:10 stating an adulterous woman should be given the death penalty. In the one case, if Jesus decided to condemn her, he would have “lost favor with the common people,” and if not, he would be “disagreeing with Moses.”³⁶ The problem immediately noticed here is in both cases the law says that both the man and the woman should be put to death. When the teachers bring only the woman it tends to obscure the guilt of both parties.³⁷ Did the Pharisees setup this encounter to “catch her in the act,” or if not, why was the man also not brought to Jesus for condemnation? We can quickly see their intentions in verse 6 were to test Jesus, and then discredit his ministry. Much has been made of verses 6-7 when Jesus wrote on the ground, and since there is almost no context anywhere else in Scripture as to what Jesus did here, all commentary on what Jesus wrote is speculation at best. Jesus responded to the

³⁵ Walvoord and Zuck, 302-303.

³⁶ Ibid., 346.

³⁷ Frances Taylor Gench, “John 7:53-8:11,” *Interpretation* (Academic OneFile) 63, no. 4 (October 2009): 398.

teachers with an unexpected statement that only those who do not have sin are capable of judging those who have sin. While this method does not work for social justice without Jesus in the picture, here Jesus points to himself as the only one who can truly judge this woman. When we look to this truth outside the *pericope* we see this statement is immediately reaffirmed in John 8:16 when Jesus says, “my judgments are true.”

As the teachers leave, one by one, with the wiser ones leaving first, Jesus gives grace to the woman in a way only God can give. When Jesus does not condemn her as the teachers expected, we look to other parts of Scripture to confirm his statement such as in John 7:23 when he heals a man on the Sabbath. In that situation the teachers believed Jesus was breaking the law by doing work on the Sabbath, but we see similar conceptual teachings in Matthew 9:13 and 12:2. In the conclusion of the *pericope*, Jesus provides an answer to the woman that condemns the sin in her life, but not the person, and in turn gave her hope in a new life apart from sin. Jesus forces the Pharisees to walk away when he “exposes their misuse of the law,” and instead shows that justice should come from grace and a loving spirit, something taught throughout the New Testament, not something that is just found here in the *pericope*.³⁸

VI. Application and Conclusion

This paper discussed the contextual issues surrounding John 7:53-8:11, asking specific questions as to its canonicity, while examining the exegetical usefulness of the story itself. Even though this account of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery most likely did not appear in the original writings of John, it does not affect any significant doctrine within the whole of Scripture. Some teachers may wish to exclude this section from reproof because of these issues, but whether a modern day pastor or teacher chooses to include or exclude the *pericope*, the wisdom

³⁸ John Piper, “Neither Do I Condemn You”.

of Jesus can be found in other areas of Scripture to support the statements within this passage. As such, many applications of forgiveness, judgmental attitudes, and repentance can be gleaned from the *pericope*, much in the same way the *Didascalia Apostolorum* used the story to “bring repentant sinners back into the congregation.”³⁹

Issues such as judgmentalism and sin on a large scale can destroy communities and nations, and on a smaller scale, can destroy “marriages, families, and churches.”⁴⁰ We have almost countless opportunities in our post-modern culture to extend grace, especially when it comes to our marriages, families, and our churches. How many congregations have split because of a spirit among members who are quick to judge, and slow to extend grace? The *pericope adulterae*, a floating, somewhat “homeless passage,” which probably needs some grace extended to it as well, provides an additional opportunity to reiterate teachings found in many other parts of the New Testament.⁴¹ It may not be an original part of John’s gospel, but this story “points us to the message of the whole New Testament.”⁴² Ultimately the *pericope* points us to Jesus, who not only gives us grace beyond what we deserve, grace is given by the only One who, without sin, can actually cast the first stone, but does not.

³⁹ Holmes, 304.

⁴⁰ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 109.

⁴¹ Frances Taylor Gench, 400.

⁴² John Piper, “Neither Do I Condemn You”.

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