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PERICOPE ADULTERAE: A MOST PERPLEXING PASSAGE

STEVEN GRABINER
Collegedale, Tennessee

Abstract

The account of the woman caught in adultery, traditionally found in John's Gospel, is full of encouragement to sinners in need of forgiveness. Nevertheless, due to its textual history, this story—referred to as the *Pericope Adulterae*—is considered by many scholars to be an interpolation. The textual history is one of the most intriguing of any biblical passage. This article reviews that history, examines possible reasons for the passage's inclusion or exclusion from John's Gospel, engages discussion on the issue of its canonicity, and gives suggestions for how today's pastors might relate to the story in their preaching.

Keywords: *Pericope Adulterae*, adulteress, textual history, canon, textual criticism

Introduction

The story of the woman caught in adultery, found in John 7:52–8:11, contains a beautiful and powerful portrayal of the gospel. It has no doubt encouraged countless believers from the time it was first written. Despite the power in the story, it is unquestionably one of the most controverted texts in the New Testament (NT). Unfortunately, when a conversation begins regarding the textual variations connected with this account, emotions become involved and if the apostolic authorship is questioned and its place in the canon threatened, then, no matter the reasoning or the evidence, the theological pull frequently derails a calm discussion. Fears of releasing a river of unbelief that will sweep away precious truth and create a whirlpool of doubt arise. It is as though the beauty of the gospel portrayed in the account creates an almost irresistible wave that overwhelms any attempt at a calm exploration of its origins and place in the canon.

Nevertheless, the *Pericope Adulterae* (*PA*) has the most unique textual history of any NT passage, and though many scholars have attempted to unravel the knot created by its background, they have only succeeded in making it tighter.¹ Much has been written on the passage, with views ranging

¹On 25–26 April 2014, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC, hosted a conference devoted to discerning the origins of this pericope. A new volume in the Library of New Testament Studies series contains several papers that were presented during that conference. Several papers argue against one another, with no unanimous (although there is a majority) consent in relation to how the passage found its way into the NT. See David Alan Black and Jacob N. Cerone, eds.,

from removing it completely from all newer translations, to urging its full acceptance. Understanding how this passage fits in the canon, and within the life of the church, is a legitimate conversation, yet not one easily navigated. The tangled threads of the background of the pericope are not easily loosened.

For the pastor, the questions often revolve around how to relate the passage to the congregation. Should it be preached or skipped over? Does the congregation need a lesson in textual criticism? How can believers be assured of the veracity of the Word of God when the translation being used brackets the text or relegates it to a footnote? It is my intention in this article to give a brief overview of the textual issues, explore select issues relating the pericope to the canon, and discuss how the passage might be handled in the local church setting.

Historical Veracity

Many scholars, whether they think the passage was written by John or not, conclude that the story faithfully records an actual event in the life of Christ. John David Punch highlights an array of commentators who, over the course of the last 120 years, have made this observation.² If this assumption is sustained, then the historicity and truth claims are secured, even if the account is considered an interpolation. As George Beasley-Murray notes, there is, “no reason to doubt its substantial truth.”³ The passage is quite in harmony with the character of Christ as unfolded in the Gospels.

In his commentary, B. F. Westcott emphatically states, “It is beyond doubt an authentic fragment of apostolic tradition.”⁴ Carl B. Bridges, who considers the story an interpolation, notes that the passage meets the form-critical standard of dissimilarity, which points to its historical authenticity. That is, the passage does not appear to have a source in first-century Judaism (Jesus’s lenient treatment of the woman is in opposition to the expectations of the Jewish people in Jesus’s day), nor does it fit in with the early church’s emphasis on sexual purity.⁵ This criterion of double dissimilarity indicates the

The Pericope of the Adulteress in Contemporary Research, LNTS 551 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

²John David Punch, “The Piously Offensive *Pericope Adulterae*” in *ibid.*, 7–31.

³George Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 143. This observation does not settle the question as to whether the passage is original with John, nor is this its intention. The disconnect between the attitude of the early church and its discipline, and this passage could be seen as an argument for the later insertion of the passage. As with many of the arguments revolving on the pericope, this is also two-edged. The disconnect could lead to the conclusion that the story was excised.

⁴B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Authorized Version with Introduction and Notes* (London: Murray, 1896), 125, <https://archive.org/stream/gospelaccording13unkngoog#page/n226/mode/2up/search/genuineness>.

⁵Carl B. Bridges, “The Canonical Status of the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7:53–8:11),” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 11 (2008): 216.

high probability that the event actually occurred.⁶ Noted Greek scholar Bruce M. Metzger declares that the story has all the “earmarks of historical veracity.”⁷

Gary Burge points to three aspects that support the authenticity of the passage. These are: Jesus’s refusal to be embroiled in the debate over how the death penalty should be carried out and critique of those who would condemn a sinner; Christ’s unequivocal stand against the representatives of the Torah; and his unconditional forgiveness of the woman, based solely on his authority. Burge then concludes that the passage represents a “unit of oral tradition,” historically accurate, but not included in the Gospels.⁸ Its historical authenticity has been recognized by believers throughout the centuries. As Jennifer Knust notes, the story was considered authoritative and reflective of an actual event, and thus considered “gospel” even when it was not found in “a Gospel book.”⁹

External Evidence

Granting that the passage discusses an actual event in the life of Christ, the next area of inquiry is, was it originally part of John’s Gospel or was it added later in the transmission process? In seeking an answer to this question, both the external evidence (history of the MS transmission) and the internal evidence (vocabulary, thematic connections to the entire book) need to be thoughtfully considered. A majority of scholars and commentary authors support the idea that the passage is an interpolation into the Gospel of John. The external textual evidence is intriguing and many pages have been spent exploring its details. Below is a summary to help outline what is known about the textual background of this story. This condensed overview, with further information in the footnotes, will demonstrate the intriguing nature of the textual history.¹⁰

⁶Craig Blomberg, “Jesus, Sinners, and Table Fellowship,” *BBR* 19.1 (2009): 37–38.

⁷Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 189.

⁸Gary Burge, “A Specific Problem in the New Testament Text and Canon: The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11),” *JETS* 27.2 (1984): 145.

⁹Jennifer Knust, “Jesus, an Adulteress, and the Development of Christian Scripture” in *A Tall Order: Writing the Social History of the Ancient World: Essays in Honor of William V. Harris*, ed. Jean-Jacques Aubert and Zsuzsanna Várhelyi, *Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 216 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 62.

¹⁰There are many in-depth discussions on this point. See William Lawrence Petersen, “ΟΥΔΕ ΕΓΩ ΣΕ [ΚΑΤΑ]ΚΡΙΝΩ John 8:11, The Protevangelium Iacobi and the History of the *Pericope Adulterae*” in *Patristic and Text-Critical Studies: The Collected Essays of William L. Petersen*, ed. Jan Krans and Joseph Verheyden, *NTTSD* 40 (Leiden: Brill 2012), 302–308. This article was originally published in *NovTsup* 89 (1997): 203–221. See also Chris Keith, “Recent and Previous Research on the Pericope Adulterae (*John 7:53–8:11*)” *CurBR* 6.3 (2008): 377–404; Burge, “A Specific Problem,” 142–143.

The passage is omitted from the earliest extant MSS;¹¹ first found in Codex Bezae (D), a fifth century MS;¹² omitted by the earliest versions: Syriac, Sahidic, Bohairic, Armenian, and Georgian;¹³ referred to in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a third century treatise on church order, penance, and the bishops' role;¹⁴ ignored by the vast majority of Greek commentators who do not discuss it;¹⁵ referenced by a few early works;¹⁶ supported by Western

¹¹Notably P^{66} (usually dated to around 200 CE), which includes diagonal strokes in the text to illustrate word order variations that the scribe was aware of, but does not indicate any awareness of the pericope; P^{75} (mid-third-century), Sinaiticus (\aleph) and Vaticanus (B) both of which are fourth century and are of the Alexandrian text-type, do not contain it. L and Δ also lack the passage, but indicate the copyist's awareness of the account by leaving a blank space following John 7:52. While the space is not large enough to hold the story, at least this indicates the scribe knew of it. See Frederick H. A. Scrivener, *Six Lectures on the Text of the New Testament and the Ancient Manuscripts* (London: Bell, 1875), 160.

¹²This is a diglot codex, including both Greek and Latin text. It is generally considered to have significant interpolations. On the other hand, the text type found in D has its origins in the middle of the second century. See Stanley E. Porter, *How We Got the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 46. No other extant Greek MS contains the story until the ninth century.

¹³Petersen, "ΟΥΔΕ ΕΓΩ ΣΕ [ΚΑΤΑ]ΚΡΙΝΩ," 305.

¹⁴In a setting to encourage bishops to act with mercy, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* apparently refers to the pericope with the following words: "Have the elders condemned thee, my daughter? She saith to him: Nay, Lord. And he said unto her: Go thy way, neither do I condemn thee" (*Did. apost.*, 2.24). This is clearly a reference to the pericope, although it does not specifically reference John's Gospel. This leaves the origin of the reference unclear.

¹⁵For example, Origen, in his commentary on John, moves from his discussion of John 7 to John 8 with no comment on the passage. See Origen, *Origen: Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 12–32*, trans. Ronald Heine, FC 89 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 166–169. Also, it is apparent that Origen never references the pericope, but does cite John 7:52 and 8:12. See Bart D. Ehrman, Gordon D. Fee, and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Text of the Fourth Gospel in the Writings of Origen, Volume I*, NTGF 3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 189–190. Similarly, Tertullian, in his discussion of adultery and judicial responses, does not refer to the *PA* either (*Pud.* 4–5). See Burge, "Specific Problem," 142.

¹⁶The earliest clear patristic reference is found in a commentary on Ecclesiastes by Didymus the Blind, a fourth century Alexandrian Father (Didymus, *Comm. Eccl.* 223.7). See Knust "An Adulteress," 66. Didymus writes that the account was found in "certain gospels." It is unclear whether he meant certain copies of the Gospel of John or certain Gospel books, which might include both John and the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*. The editors of his commentary prefer the former, arguing that he found the story in some, but not all, of the copies of John. Bart Ehrman argues for the latter. See Knust "An Adulteress," 73; Bart D. Ehrman, *Studies in the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, NTTS 33 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 199–207. Tommy Wasserman also argues that Didymus meant the latter. See "The Strange Case of the Missing Adulteress" in *Pericope of the Adulteress*, 34–35). Despite this disputed reference, it is clear that Didymus knew the story, and that it was found in certain Gospels.

patristic writers, such as Ambrose, Pacian of Barcelona, and Ambrosiaster;¹⁷ acknowledged in many MSS either by its unusual nature—whether absent or present in the manuscript—or by marginal indicators;¹⁸ acknowledged by Jerome¹⁹ and Augustine²⁰ as appearing in some MSS and not others; found in various locations in the MS tradition;²¹ and placed by Erasmus in his Greek

Papias of Hierapolis, a second century bishop, may have also referred to the *PA*. Eusebius comments that Papias knew of a story concerning a woman accused of “sins” before the Lord (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.17). Whether this refers to the *PA*, or a conflation of stories, or a different woman altogether (perhaps the woman in Luke 7) is open to discussion. It is also unclear whether Papias was referring to *The Gospel of Hebrews* when referencing the pericope.

Additionally, The *Protevangelium Iacobi*, a second century work alludes to the passage. See Petersen, “ΟΥΔΕ ΕΓΩ ΣΕ [ΚΑΤΑ]ΚΡΙΝΩ,” 313.

¹⁷Burge, “Specific Problems,” 143.

¹⁸Asterisks or obeli are placed in the margins, indicating that the scribe either knew of its existence (if missing from the copy he worked with) or questioned its authenticity (if found in the MS). See Chris Keith, “The Initial Location of the *Pericope Adulterae* in Fourfold Tradition,” *NovT* 51.3 (2009): 17. David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 96. There is an *umlaut* in Vaticanus (B) at this point in the Gospel of John, suggesting the scribe at least knew of the passage and the textual differences. See Bridges “The Canonical Status,” 213.

¹⁹In 383 CE, Jerome presented to Damasus I, the bishop of Rome, a Latin translation of the Gospels that he had been commissioned to produce. This eventually became part of the Vulgate and includes the *PA*. Jerome states that he found the pericope in many Greek and Latin codices. See Burge, “Specific Problem,” 143. See also M. V. Pereira, “A Textual Analysis of the Passage About the Adulteress,” 19, <http://www.trinitybiblechurch.org/resources/articles/file/16-a-textual-analysis-of-the-passage-about-the-adulteress?tmpl=component>.

²⁰Augustine, though supporting it, knew of its textual difficulties. See Knust, “An Adulteress,” 65.

²¹The majority of texts have it in the traditional location; however, it does occur after John 7:36 or 44, and at the end of the Gospel of John. In the MSS tradition *f*¹³, it appears in two different locations, Luke 21:38 and 24:53 (Burge, “Specific Problem,” 143). This placement in the Gospel of Luke has been attributed to how the pericope was treated in the lectionaries. See Chris Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John and the Literacy of Jesus*, NTTSD 38 (Leiden; Boston: Brill 2009), 138. Keith summarizes his argument by saying, “It is clear that several of the alternative manuscript locations for *PA* are due to lectionary influence” (*ibid.*, 139). Others have argued for a Lukan source of the story. See Kyle R. Hughes, “The Lukan Special Material and the Tradition History of the *Pericope Adulterae*,” *NovT* 55.3 (2013): 232–257. Keith argues that Lukan authenticity is implausible (“Recent and Previous Research,” 384). Caution must be urged against taking this late evidence very seriously. At the same time, the *PA* is found in alternative locations. The vast majority of MSS (some 1,350 MSS and 1,000 lectionaries) treat the passage as a normal part of John’s Gospel. Therefore, the handful of MSS that diverge in its placement of the passage, should be weighed against the great majority from the same period.

NT, despite his awareness of the textual history, because of its long reception by the church.²²

In sum, it is recognized that the *PA* is ancient, probably historical, and yet is not found in the oldest extant MSS. According to the testimony of Augustine and Jerome, in the fourth century the pericope was found in some Greek MSS, but missing in others. Therefore, while the oldest copy extant only reaches to the fifth century, at the latest it was in the MS tradition in the fourth century. It also is found in different locations in certain MSS, and does not become regularly attested in the Greek textual tradition until the ninth century. These factors have led some scholars to describe the passage as a pericope seeking a resting place. Unquestionably, the diversity of MS locations for the passage is unmatched by any other text.

Petersen calls it a “floating logion” due to the variety of locations in which it is found.²³ Andreas Köstenberger describes it as a “floating narrative in search of a home.”²⁴ This description gives the impression that the traditional location of the pericope is uncertain and that scribes were attempting to find a place to insert the passage. However, this is clearly misleading and must be counterbalanced by the fact that the traditional location is the one that best explains the others. This overstated misrepresentation should be laid to rest.

Chris Keith demonstrates that the current location of the *PA* is also the place where it first entered the MS tradition.²⁵ This was the ‘home’ of the narrative. He argues three points: the traditional location for the story is the majority location; it is the earliest demonstrable location;²⁶ and that the late alternative locations are at least partially due to the lectionary influence.²⁷ The first two are incontrovertible, the third has been debated.

Keith cites several authors, including van Lopik, Colwell, Metzger, and Wikgren, who have recognized that the lectionary system has influenced non-lectionary texts.²⁸ Van Lopik argues that the location of the passage in *f*¹³ “is a blatant example of the influence” of the lectionary system. The *PA* was read on 8 October (during the feast of St. Pelagia), which follows the reading

²²Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrase on John*, trans. Jane E. Philips, vol. 46 of *Collected Works of Erasmus*, New Testament Scholarship (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 286. See also idem, *Controversies*, ed. Jane E. Philips, trans. Erika Rummel, vol. 72 of *Collected Works of Erasmus*, New Testament Scholarship (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 215–216.

²³Petersen, “ΟΥΔΕ ΕΓΩ ΣΕ [ΚΑΤΑ]ΚΡΙΝΩ,” 302.

²⁴Andreas Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 260. This description is clearly misleading given the overwhelming number of MSS locating the story in the traditional place that are contemporaneous with the handful of MSS that place it in an alternative location.

²⁵Keith, *Literacy of Jesus*, 119–120.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 131.

²⁸Ibid., 135.

of 7 October, which contained Luke 21:12–19. Thus, the placement of the *PA* at this point in Luke’s Gospel, van Lopik contends, is a clear result of the lectionary connection.²⁹ Tommy Wasserman agrees noting that *f*¹³ and several lectionaries move the *PA* to Matt 26:39, which is “most certainly due to lectionary influence.”³⁰ A few of the MSS in *f*¹³ have the passage placed both in Luke 22:43–44 and Matt 26:39. Duplication of a passage in different locations is “characteristic of lectionary influence.”³¹

While the description that the *PA* is a text searching for a home is overstated, nevertheless, this does not diminish its unusual textual history. For this reason, the external evidence has led the majority of scholars to consider that the passage is not original to John’s Gospel.

Internal Evidence

In addition to the extraordinary textual background, there are several internal arguments that are called upon to question the authenticity of the passage. Three main ones are: issues related to linguistics; the absence of John’s familiar dichotomies; and the difference between the way this woman is portrayed and others in John, who are described as followers of Christ. Internal evidence, by its very nature, is often subjective. The lack of dichotomies could simply be the result of the subject matter. Likewise, the portrayal of the woman may not fit the paradigm in this Gospel, but that could be attributed to the circumstances at hand, especially if the historical nature of the account is accepted, as it is by many commentators.

However, a more forceful argument is often made based on the linguistic differences between the *PA* and the rest of John’s Gospel. The passage contains a number of words that are not present elsewhere in John. For example, the phrase, “scribes and Pharisees” appears nowhere else in John, but is frequent in the Synoptics. There are fifteen words in this section that are not found in the rest of John’s Gospel.³² This, in addition to the large number of variants within the passage, leads many scholars to reject Johannine authorship.³³

²⁹T. van Lopik, “Once Again: Floating Words, Their Significance for Textual Criticism,” *NTS* 41.2 (1995): 291, as quoted in Keith, *Literacy of Jesus*, 137.

³⁰Wasserman, “Strange Case,” 52.

³¹*Ibid.*, 52. Wasserman cites Colwell and Metzger in *ibid.*, 52n66.

³²Keith, “Recent and Previous Research,” 380. Other lists include seven, thirteen, or fourteen words, but Keith’s seems to be the most thorough.

³³However, it must be recognized that this is a very small sample to determine authorship. By some estimates, ten thousand words are needed, yet the pericope contains less than two hundred words, in some measure tempering this argument. See Alan F. Johnson, “A Stylistic Trait of the Fourth Gospel in the *Pericope Adulterae*?” *BETS* 9.2 (1966): 91–96, esp. 93. Johnson refers back to Bruce M. Metzger, “A Reconsideration of Certain Arguments Against the Pauline Authorship of the Pastoral Epistles,” *ExpTim* 70.3 (1958): 93–94. Metzger refers to G. Udny Yule, *The Statistical Study of Literary Vocabulary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1944), 281.

This argument must be balanced against other passages in John's Gospel that demonstrate a significant use of unique words. This occurs in sections of the text that are considered authentic. For example, John 1:14–27 has eleven unique expressions, 2:5–17 has nineteen, and 6:3–14 has thirteen.³⁴ Additionally, twice as many of John's habitual expressions are found in the pericope than in 2:13–17.³⁵ The *PA* is, therefore, not so unusual in this regard, thus mitigating the previous observation.

Often overlooked is the fact that the passage does contain a uniquely Johannine expression. John frequently utilizes short explanatory phrases throughout his narrative. These interpretative expressions help the reader understand what is occurring in the storyline. For example, in the conversation regarding the multiplying of bread for the multitude, there is a narrative explanation that Jesus was about to test Philip (6:6). The expression τοῦτο δὲ ἔλεγεν πειράζων contains three distinct aspects. They are the conjunction δε, the demonstrative pronoun τοῦτο, and the verb 'to speak' (ἔλεγεν).³⁶ Similar phrases are found scattered ten times throughout the Gospel (6:71; 7:39, 11:13, 51; 12:6, 33; 13:11, 28; 21:19). The *PA* contains one of these expressions that explains the motivation behind the accusations against the woman (8:6). The writer tells us that this was done to test Jesus (τοῦτο δὲ ἔλεγον πειράζοντες). The usage of the three introductory elements is either a literary thread indicating a common author behind this section and the rest of the book, or a subtle scribal interpolation in an attempt to make it appear as though it is authentic.³⁷

It is also commonly argued that the *PA* interrupts the narrative flow of John 7 and 8. Noted textual critic and scholar Daniel B. Wallace overstates the case when he writes that the passage "seriously disrupts the flow of the argument."³⁸ As Punch observes, there is no clear discussion on "how it breaks the flow."³⁹ To the contrary, evidence can be marshalled to show that the passage does fit the context. For example, there is the third person aorist found in 7:52–53 (ἀπεκρίθησαν and ἐπορεύθησαν), the fact that the pericope heightens the issues over Jesus as a teacher, and the theme of judgment found in both John 7 and 8. Additionally, the narrative sets the temple as the background before (7:14), during (8:2), and after (20) the incident. The absence of the disciples throughout the flow of this section of the narrative also indicates a structural unity.⁴⁰

³⁴John David Punch, *The Pericope Adulterae: Theories of Insertion and Omission* (PhD diss., Radboud University Nijmegen, 2010), 159–160.

³⁵Johnson, "Stylistic Trait," 93.

³⁶Ibid., 95.

³⁷Ibid., 96.

³⁸Daniel B. Wallace, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Argument, Outline," *New Testament Introductions and Outlines*, 28 June 2004, <https://bible.org/seriespage/4-gospel-john-introduction-argument-outline>.

³⁹Punch, "Piously Offensive," 9.

⁴⁰Keith, *Previous Research*, 381. Keith also references several scholars, who recognize these points, while not necessarily arguing for Johannine authenticity.

Keith, although supporting the idea that the pericope is an insertion into the text, argues that the literary style fits within the book of John and is the work of a clever interpolator.⁴¹ Instead of being a disruptive section within narrative, the passage contributes to the context and highlights important themes running through the storyline. Keith highlights four major areas of resonance between the pericope and John. These are Jesus's superiority to Moses (5:47; 6:32; 8:6, 8), the use of double *entendres* (7:15; 8:6, 8), Jesus being judge and judged (3:17–19; 7:24, 50; 8:11), and the emphasis on writing in John (7:15; 8:6, 8; 19:19–22; 20:30). Keith demonstrates that the passage fits the context, and, while this might be seen as evidence for it being written by John, he concludes that it is the work of a skillful interpolator.⁴²

J. P. Heil identifies several linguistic, thematic, and stylistic links that argue strongly for the *PA* being an integral part of the Gospel of John. Heil emphasizes that there is a linguistic linkage highlighted by the recurrent use of Jesus *teaching in the temple* (7:14; 8:2); the narrative aside mentioned above (6:6; 8:6); the command to sin no longer (5:14; 8:11) and repeated mention of *throwing stones*, first in relation to the woman, and then in relation to Christ (8:7, 59).

Heil also identifies several literary links including the larger narrative plot to seek and kill or arrest Jesus (7:1, 11, 25; 8:7–9), the thematic connection to Christ as one greater than Moses (7:15, 19, 50–51; 8:3–5), and the idea of judging/condemning so prevalent in the book (7:24, 51; 8:11, 26). While Heil recognizes many of the ideas mentioned by Keith, he comes to a different conclusion regarding the origin of the passage, believing that it is integral to the entire narrative.⁴³

The subjective nature of the internal evidence is demonstrated by the fact that scholars, such as Heil and Keith, can both agree that the story fits the larger context of John, and yet they come to opposite conclusions as to its authorship. Thus, the internal evidence is subjective; arguments can be made on both sides, indicating that it is not completely decisive.

Interpolation or Omission?

Due predominately to the extremely unusual textual history, most scholars consider the passage an interpolation. This naturally raises the question, why was it inserted? Conversely, for those who believe it is authentic, the question becomes, why was it removed? Given the paucity of existing ancient MSS, it is impossible to answer these questions definitively, and the historical

⁴¹Chris Keith, "The *Pericope Adulterae*: A Theory of Attentive Insertion" in *Pericope of the Adulteress*, 89–113 (93, 96, 102).

⁴²Keith, *Literacy of Jesus*, 190–201. Naturally, this evidence could point to it either being a skillful interpolation or original with John. Keith chooses the former due to the external evidence.

⁴³See J. P. Heil "The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress (John 7:53–8:11) Reconsidered," *Bib* 72 (1991): 182–191; idem, "A Rejoinder to 'Reconsider 'The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress (John 7:53–8:11) Reconsidered,'" *EgT* 25.3 (1994): 361–366.

knot remains firmly tied. Judging the passage as either an interpolation or an omission creates difficulties that are not encountered with any other passage of Scripture. As Larry Hurtado states, there is “nothing comparable to the putative excision or insertion of the PA.”⁴⁴ There are three well-thought-out theories that attempt to explain the unusual background of the text. Two argue for its insertion, the other for its excision. Keith has developed the most thorough theory of insertion in his several works.

In contrast to the “floating narrative” searching for a home offered by Köstenberger and others, Keith builds a rational argument to explain why the passage settled in this part of John’s Gospel. His thesis is that the passage was inserted into a section of John, in which questions were already being raised regarding Jesus’s literacy (7:15). The pericope demonstrates that Jesus could both read and write, and this served as a polemic against the wider accusations that Christians were uneducated. Keith demonstrates that the ancient world criticized Christianity due to the illiteracy of its followers.⁴⁵ He postulates that the pericope was inserted in the third century as a part of a larger trend to portray Jesus as a wise, elite, literate teacher.⁴⁶ This is, after all, the “sole claim within the canonical or non-canonical Jesus tradition” that Jesus actually could write.⁴⁷

To support his argument, Keith explores the use of *καταγράφω* (8:6) and *γράφω* (8:8) in the story. Keith connects the imagery of Jesus’s writing with that of Moses. Specifically, “Jesus’ lack of condemnation of the woman . . . derives from the same scribal authority that originally authored the Decalogue.”⁴⁸ Connecting with the larger themes in the narrative, Jesus’s writing is seen to be greater than that of Moses. Keith’s works contain the most thought-through discussion on why the passage was inserted in the traditional location, engaging with the socio-historical context. Keith also recognizes one of the weaknesses of his argument, which is that no patristic writers ever use the passage to support Jesus’s literacy.⁴⁹

Another theory that supports the passage as an insertion is that of Burge.⁵⁰ He suggests that the passage is an authentic text that originated from the oral traditions used to construct the Gospels. Seeing the passage as conveying an antique and authentic description of an event in the life of Christ, he raises the question as to why it was not included in the written Gospels. He argues that the passage’s temporary disappearance for 350 years is based on the ethos and sexual mores of early Christianity. The apparently easy way of forgiveness found in the story ran counter to the insistence on penance and sexual purity

⁴⁴Larry Hurtado, “The *Pericope Adulterae*: Where From Here,” in *Pericope of the Adulteress*, 153.

⁴⁵Keith, *Literacy of Jesus*, 223–227.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 249.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁸Idem, *Jesus’ Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee*, LNTS 413 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 153.

⁴⁹Keith, *Literacy of Jesus*, 250.

⁵⁰Burge, “Specific Problem,” 146–147.

so characteristic of the age. Burge contends that it was not until the Church was firmly established and bishops were admonished to demonstrate mercy that the experience of the woman caught in adultery could be used as a model for penitence. However, this suggestion, although widespread and utilized as evidence of the suppression of the passage, fails to comport to the historic use of the passage. This will be more fully explained below in the discussion on the suppression theory.

The third theory suggested to explain the passage's extraordinary background is the suppression theory.⁵¹ It was first offered by Augustine, who believed it was omitted from John's Gospel because the story was offensive to standards of high purity and might give license to women to sin.⁵² This is particularly interesting, as Augustine himself "imposed strict codes of sexual avoidance on himself and his own clergy."⁵³ In other words, Augustine's strong sexual boundaries (he once expelled a clergyman for speaking with a nun at an inappropriate time)⁵⁴ would have inclined him to accept a MS that did not contain the *PA*. However, he argued for its inclusion, despite his own sexual mores. This might be considered as support for his observations.

Unfortunately for this idea, the earliest references to the *PA* give no hint of discomfort of the kind that Augustine suggests. The *Protevangelium Iacobi*, an apocryphal second century work, makes a distinct allusion to the pericope. This work describes the suspicion that arose when Mary was found pregnant. Both she and Joseph were given a test to determine their innocence, which included drinking poison. Being unharmed the priest recognized their virtue and pronounced to them, "Neither do I condemn you."⁵⁵ The similarity of the expression is noted below.

Table 1. Textual Comparison of *Protevangelium Iacobi* 16.1 and John 8:11

Reference	Text
<i>Protev. Iac.</i> 16.1	οὐδὲ ἐγὼ [κατά] κρίνω
John 8:11	οὐδὲ ἐγὼ σε [κατά] κρίνω

⁵¹John David Punch, *The Pericope Adulterae: Theories of Insertion and Omission: An Academic Essay in Theology* (Saarbrücken: LAP, 2012), 356–359.

⁵²Augustine said it was suppressed because it might encourage sexual license (*De adulterinis coniugis* 7.6). See also Knust, "An Adulteress," 61.

⁵³Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 396.

⁵⁴See *ibid.*

⁵⁵Whether the author received the phrase from a copy of the Gospel of John, or another source is an open question. Yet, it shows familiarity with the pericope and the basic contours of the story. This is the oldest reference to the woman caught in adultery. See Petersen, "ΟΥΔΕ ΕΓΩ ΣΕ [ΚΑΤΑ]ΚΡΙΝΩ," 321–322.

This phrase appears to be a reference to Jesus's words, currently found only in 8:11, and is cited in a manner that indicates that the story was well known and authoritative. This allusion is not made with any sense of embarrassment or awkwardness of the implications of the *PA*.⁵⁶ Rather, it is very likely that the author referred to the pericope, in order to legitimize his own story and was not at all uncomfortable with the lack of penance or the imagined sexual license the passage promotes.⁵⁷

If this earliest reference to the incident indicates no discomfort, but rather an authoritative use of the passage, it is implausible that Augustine's reason for its exclusion is valid. Given the way the story is used in *Protevangelium Iacobi*, deliberate "exclusion of the sort Augustine imagined seems unlikely."⁵⁸ On the other hand, while Keith's theory is suggestive for inclusion, it is not overwhelmingly compelling.

If John did not originally pen it as part of his Gospel, did a later redactor, perhaps part of a Johannine community, insert it? Or, as Keith contends, was it inserted in a strategic place for polemical reasons? Or if John did originally write it, what could explain its absence in the MS tradition? An excision of this type could not have been done accidentally. What would be the reason for the passage's exclusion? Unfortunately, without further discoveries of ancient texts that might shed more light on the pericope, the definitive answer to these questions escapes us. What is obvious is that there is an intentionality about either the passage's excision or insertion. After exploring the textual history of the narrative, as well as the apparent reference to it in the *Protevangelium*, Petersen concludes there is still a great lack of clarity.

Petersen highlights the difficulty of unraveling this textual knot by referring to another passage in the *Protevangelium*. In addition to referring to the words "Neither do I condemn you," there is a second connection within the work to the Gospel of John. The story also contains a digital examination of Mary's hymen, which is reflective of Thomas's desire to place a finger in Jesus's wound. Once again, there is a parallelism in the expressions used. These two allusions contribute to an argument that if the *PA* was not original to John, it was certainly added very early. The origins for both of the allusions are found only in John.⁵⁹

⁵⁶Knust, "Adulteress," 69, 71.

⁵⁷Ibid., 79.

⁵⁸Ibid., 67. Knust suggests that Augustine was actually using this reason as a polemic against those who disagreed with his position on divorce (ibid., 65).

⁵⁹See Petersen, "ΟΥΔΕ ΕΓΩ ΣΕ [ΚΑΤΑ]ΚΡΙΝΩ," 322.

Table 2. Textual Comparison of *Protevangelium Iacobi* 19.19 and John 20:25

Reference	Text
<i>Protev. Iac.</i> 19.19	ἐὰν μὴ βάλω τον δάκτυλόν μου
John 20:25	ἐὰν μὴ . . . βάλω τον δάκτυλόν μου

Using form-critical criteria, Petersen concludes that this is not a random event. He argues that the author of the *Protevangelium* knew of and used John's Gospel.⁶⁰ This fact adds to the difficulty of discerning the origins of the *PA*. Since the author of the *Protevangelium* depended on John for one textual allusion, does this indicate that he depended on John for the phrases now only found in the *PA*? Or is there a common source for both the *Protevangelium* and John, such as the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*?⁶¹ After exploring these possibilities, Petersen rightly states that the more one "delves into the puzzle of the origins of the *pa*, the more one sees how difficult it is to cut the knot cleanly."⁶² The difficulty one encounters in the history of the *PA* appropriately introduces the issue as to how the passage should be treated today.

Canonicity

Although a majority of scholars consider the passage an interpolation, there is no unanimity of thought into how the *PA* should be related to the canon. This is evidenced by modern translations continuing to place the pericope in the text (although with either a different font, brackets, italics or by means of a footnote) unlike other questionable passages that have been removed (such as 1 John 5:7–8). Wallace argues strongly against this "tradition of timidity" that exists among translators. Based on a concern for a pursuit of truth and strengthening the faith of believers, Wallace contends that the *PA* should find no place in the canon, have no part in a translation, nor be part of a pastor's preaching.⁶³

However, for theological reasons rather than text-critical ones, the majority of the Christian world continues to view the *PA* as canonical. The Roman Catholic Church, on the strength of the decisions and statements of the Council of Trent, considers that the text of the Vulgate contains the canon for the church.⁶⁴ Texts used by the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as

⁶⁰Ibid., 321.

⁶¹Ibid., 322–324.

⁶²Ibid., 327.

⁶³Daniel B. Wallace, "My Favorite Passage that's Not in the Bible," 24 June 2008, <https://bible.org/article/my-favorite-passage-thats-not-bible>.

⁶⁴Bridges, "The Canonical Status," 217. *The Council of Trent: The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), n.p., <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/trentall.html>.

the Russian Orthodox and the Ukrainian Churches, all include the pericope without discussion.⁶⁵ Similarly, those Protestant Christians, who believe the Majority Text is a superior text—whether based on textual concerns or other reasons—consider the passage canonical.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, this determination will not suffice for those scholars who urge that only the closest approximation to the original autograph should be canonical.⁶⁷ This tension is not new, but reflects a situation that has existed through the history of Christianity, a point to which more consideration will be given momentarily.

While a full discussion on issues related to the forming of the NT canon is beyond the scope of this article, highlighting certain perspectives and canonical models is important, specifically as they relate to the *PA*. What are the criteria by which a passage of Scripture is determined to be canonical? If that question can be answered clearly, then those criteria can be applied to the passage under consideration. However, as with other aspects of the *PA*, there are opposing ideas pulling on opposite ends of the knot.

The fundamental question focuses on the question, “what is a canonical reading?” Answers to this question vary greatly. Brevard Childs’s understanding is that the canon is related to a particular community of faith, and that the final form of a text represents its canonical form.⁶⁸ Childs is not primarily interested in the literary development of a text, that is the various layers uncovered by the tools of historical criticism, but in the text’s final form.⁶⁹ From this perspective, an argument can clearly be made for considering the passage as canonical. On the other end would lie Wallace’s and Köstenberger’s text-critical concern of discerning as close as possible the original text of the NT and letting that be the guide for making canonical decisions.

Armin D. Baum identifies three different models used to determine canonicity. These are the ecclesiastical approach, the pneumatological approach, and the historical-theological criteria.⁷⁰ An example of the first is the decision of the Council of Trent to declare that the Vulgate is the canonical

⁶⁵Bridges, “The Canonical Status,” 218.

⁶⁶Maurice A. Robinson, “New Testament Textual Criticism: The Case for Byzantine Priority,” *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* 6 (2001): n.p., <http://rosetta.reltech.org/TC/vol06/Robinson2001.html>; Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman describe the case for Byzantine priority—though they do not accept it (*The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. [New York: Oxford, 2005], 218–222). See also Bridges, “The Canonical Status,” 219.

⁶⁷Robert W. Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament,” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 546. Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: Harper Books, 2005), 62.

⁶⁸Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 149–219.

⁶⁹Idem, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM, 1984), 40–43.

⁷⁰Armin D. Baum, “Does the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53–8:11) have Canonical Authority? An Interconfessional Approach,” *BBR* 24.2 (2014): 163–178.

version of Scripture. In this view, the church decides what is canonical or not. From this perspective, the *PA* is canonical for those communities that have an ecclesiastical text.⁷¹

The pneumatological approach was developed by John Calvin⁷² and supported by Karl Barth.⁷³ It argues that the work of the Holy Spirit endorses what is canonical, and that the influence of the Spirit is superior to reason, but supported by reasoned arguments.⁷⁴ Considered as a passage through which the Holy Spirit has worked in the lives of many, the story of the woman would clearly be canonical.⁷⁵ It is of interest, however, that when Calvin argued for the *PA*'s use and acceptance, he did not do so based on the role of the Spirit, but on its long history of usage within the church.⁷⁶

The historical-theological approach was followed by Luther, and this most closely follows the criteria that helped shape the canon when Christianity first wrestled with these issues. For Luther, two fundamental historical criteria were a book's apostolic authorship and reception into the church. Two theological criteria utilized were its orthodoxy and elevation of the Christ.⁷⁷ Without question, the *PA* is both orthodox and points to Christ's prominence, and by these criteria would be considered canonical. Therefore, if the approaches outlined by Baum were the sum total of canonical perspectives, arguments could be made for accepting the passage into the canon. It has been accepted by an ecclesiastical text, the Holy Spirit has changed lives through the passage, and it is an orthodox teaching that elevates Christ. However, this is too simple an answer to a complex issue.

Michael J. Kruger takes the discussion of canonical criteria further and explores what is the "canonical worldview" behind different models. The first

⁷¹Baum, "Canonical Authority," 165.

⁷²See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.8.1. There Calvin argues that it is "easy to perceive something divine in the sacred Scriptures" due to the impact they have on the mind and heart. Other writers do not have this impact, due to their lack of the influence of the Holy Spirit.

⁷³See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.2.3.20. Barth recognizes that, while questions concerning the canon might arise, these need to be settled by an appeal to the Spirit, and it should be expected that the Spirit would witness to the Church.

⁷⁴Baum, "Canonical Authority," 167–168.

⁷⁵Burge, "Specific Problem," 148.

⁷⁶Baum, "Canonical Authority," 169.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 171. This is seen in Luther's 1522 preface to the Epistle of St. James, as well as that to Jude. In referring to Jude, he recognizes that it was rejected by some fathers from the canon. James, he contends, does not teach the gospel, and thus should not be considered authoritative. He is widely quoted as saying, "What does not teach Christ is not apostolic," regardless of who teaches it (*Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, trans. John Dillenburger [New York: Anchor Books, 2004], 36). He follows this by saying, "what does teach Christ is apostolic, even if Judas . . . or Herod does it" (*ibid.*).

two categories he explores are identified as the “community determined” or “historically determined.”⁷⁸

An example of the community-determined model would be the Roman Catholic decision mentioned above, that the text of the Vulgate is the authoritative canon for the church, by virtue of the decision of the Church. It is the authority of the Church that solves the problem of what comprises the canon. As Hans Küng writes, “Without the Church, there would be no New Testament.”⁷⁹ On a different part of the theological spectrum, but still within this model of canonicity, would be the position of those who view the canon as a human construct. One perspective within this view would be that the twenty-seven books of the NT were simply those chosen by the theological winners of a very diverse early Christian milieu, in which there was no real orthodoxy. As James Barr notes, when the canon was formed, all the other writings which did not receive such status were consigned to oblivion. Canonical status was given to certain texts and this status we respect, because others made that choice. “The decision to collect a group of chosen books and form a ‘Scripture’ are all human decisions.”⁸⁰ One view of Christianity became dominant, and it chose what books were acceptable and what were heretical.⁸¹ The two examples here are widely separated theologically, but they both identify the community as determining what is canonical, and this is a fundamental aspect of this canonical worldview.⁸²

The historically determined model attempts to establish the canon by exploring the historical merits of the various books. Here the emphasis is on the origins of a book or its component parts. Once again, this model can be used along a wide theological spectrum, resulting in either a “canon within the canon,” in which parts of books are considered canonical, or full acceptance

⁷⁸Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 28–29. Kruger recognizes that it is very difficult to categorize scholarly approaches, and that there is frequently overlap within the models. However, his concern is to clarify on what grounds someone considers a book canonical, and also to recognize that there is some generalization taking place in his discussion. Despite these caveats, he makes an important contribution to the topic.

⁷⁹Hans Küng, *The Council in Action: Theological Reflections on the Second Vatican Council*, trans. C. Hastings (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 187.

⁸⁰James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 120. See also *ibid.*, 116, 118.

⁸¹For the origins of this concept, see Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, trans. Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), xxi–xxv, 149–158.

⁸²Kruger has a fuller discussion of the examples mentioned, as well as an evaluation of each perspective (*Canon Revisited*, 29–66). Kruger also discusses Child’s canonical-critical model and Barth’s existential/neo-orthodox model as examples of community defined canon. The four models vary greatly but share a common thread: the community determines what is the canon.

of the twenty-seven books in the NT.⁸³ Luther's stance, mentioned above, would be an example of this model.⁸⁴ Certain criteria—frequently apostolicity, orthodoxy, and antiquity—are used to measure what books would be included in the canon.⁸⁵ Apostolicity is clearly a frequent and dominant criteria used in this model. It has been viewed as the “central criterion” that gives rise to the others. For some, the question as to what books form the canon is essentially a question as to which books have apostolic authority.⁸⁶

Using the same model, but once more on a different part of the theological spectrum, would be those scholars who pursue, by standard higher critical investigation, the core message of the NT. These researchers try to assess which texts are the earliest layers of the traditions, attempting to get to the “real Jesus.”⁸⁷ A clear weakness with this view is that now the Scripture is subject to external criteria that individuals have chosen to use in order to determine its veracity. Kruger argues that, even among those who would hold to a high view of Scripture, the idea of an external criteria that the church used to differentiate between canonical and non-canonical books is misleading. This would result in a situation similar to the historically conditioned model, in which an outside standard determines what is, or is not, canonical.⁸⁸ Kruger attempts to outline a canonical model that is not based on an externally imposed standard.

Kruger's final model is described as the *self-authenticating canon*. This model attempts to ground the validity of the canon within the content of the canon itself.⁸⁹ In this view, the canon itself provides the criteria necessary to determine which books should be considered canonical. The danger of circular reasoning is evident, as the question is being asked of the NT, “how can one know which books are canonical?” Kruger acknowledges this weakness, while at the same time pointing out that other epistemological systems face the same charge. For example, how could one examine the reliability of the rational faculties without utilizing and presupposing their reliability? One can ask the question of Scripture, “What books belong in the canon?” The answer

⁸³Once again, there is a fuller discussion and evaluation in *ibid.*, 67–87.

⁸⁴Although Luther's treatment of James, Hebrews, and Revelation might also place him in the “canon within the canon” perspective. Either way, he was using criteria to determine what was canonical.

⁸⁵Metzger suggests apostolicity, usage, and the rule of faith (*The Canon of the New Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992], 251–254). F. F. Bruce enumerates several criteria for canonicity. These include apostolicity, historicity, orthodoxy, and catholicity (*The Canon of Scripture* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988], 255–269).

⁸⁶C. Stephen Evans, “Canonicity, Apostolicity, and Biblical Authority: Some Kierkegaardian Reflections,” in Craig G. Bartholomew et al., eds., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 150, 153. This would also include those books written by authors who were closely connected to the apostles, such as Mark or Luke.

⁸⁷Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 69.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 80.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 89.

given in Scripture is not an inspired table of contents, but rather an epistemic environment that gives guidance to answer the question.⁹⁰

Within this scripturally formed environment there are three components that give direction in the formation of the canon.⁹¹ The first is providential exposure. For the church to identify what books are canonical, it must have interaction with candidates for inclusion. The missing letters of Paul to the Corinthians or to Laodicea have providentially been lost, thus naturally excluding them from the process.

The second component within this scripturally formed environment is attributes of canonicity. These criteria are similar to those discerned under other models, the difference here being that Scripture itself is seen as the basis for these benchmarks. These attributes are apostolic origins,⁹² corporate reception (that is, reception by the church as a whole),⁹³ and divine qualities.

The third component of this scripturally formed environment that gives direction in the formation of the canon is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit testifies to the truthfulness of the criteria, helping the believer to see their validity.

All of these characteristics are derived from Scripture itself, providing self-authenticating criteria. Naturally, which model and criteria a scholar emphasizes will impact their conclusion regarding the passage under consideration, and whether it can be seen as canonical.

Köstenberger exemplifies this fact. He explicitly denies that the story of the woman should have a place in the canon and his reason is the questionable textual background. Köstenberger insists that, despite the historical authenticity of the passage, it “should not be regarded as part of the Christian canon.” It should be “omitted from preaching in the churches” and not included in the main text of Bible translations.⁹⁴ To include it would be to neglect issues “such as canonicity, inspiration, and biblical authority.”⁹⁵ Here, Köstenberger appears to be applying a historically determined model of canonicity and rejects the *PA*. F. F. Bruce, using the same model, comes to a different conclusion.

⁹⁰Ibid., 91–94.

⁹¹Ibid., 94. Kruger develops these concepts throughout the rest of his volume.

⁹²Apostolic authority does not mean that the apostles wrote every canonical book. It includes the idea that canonical writings carry an authoritative message and come from the apostolic era.

⁹³The difference between this perspective and the position of Roman Catholic Church is that the latter considers the church’s reception of a book as the ground for the canonical authority. That is, it is the church’s authority that makes the book canonical. Kruger’s argument is that the church’s reception of a book is a result of the “*self-authenticating nature of Scripture*.” Kruger also recognizes that there is not an absolute unity within the church regarding canonicity, but that there is a dominant unity. Naturally, this raises the question, what is a ‘dominant’ unity? See *ibid.*, 103–106.

⁹⁴Andreas Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 248.

⁹⁵Ibid., 249n10.

He argues that it is “eminently worthy of being treated as canonical” due to its historical nature, and the truth of the gospel contained in the account.⁹⁶

Consideration of canonical models potentially tightens the knot in the *PA* debate. While questions of textual criticism and canonicity are distinct, they are closely related. Following Kruger, as the early church responded to the self-authentication within Scripture, the church did not insist on a particular version of the canonical books. The same conclusion can be derived from the community-determined model. The original text “was apparently not of primary importance” to those involved in recognizing (or determining) the authoritative books that would comprise the canon. There was no effort to establish a standard text in the first centuries of Christianity.⁹⁷

It was the *book itself* that was considered canonical, not necessarily the individual readings within it. The church fathers were aware of textual differences, frequently alleging that these discrepancies were the work of heretics. Nevertheless, there is no record of any discussion among the Fathers as to whether or not a form of the text was canonical, even with the presence of variants. For example, Eusebius and Jerome both discussed which text of the Gospel of Mark was preferable, those copies with or without the longer ending. Yet, neither of them suggested that one text was not canonical.⁹⁸ “In effect, the manuscript an individual church possessed was canonical; a neighboring church may have had” a different form of the same books.⁹⁹

This recognition that the early church did not standardize the texts that were considered canonical is supported by Metzger. “In short it appears that the question of canonicity pertains to the documents qua document, and not to one particular form or version.”¹⁰⁰ “The category of ‘canonical’ appears to have been broad enough to include all variant readings . . . that emerged” during the transmission of the NT “while apostolic tradition was a living entity.”¹⁰¹ Christianity accepts a “wide variety of contemporary versions as the canonical New Testament” even though the versions differ—some containing John 7:53–8:11 and others omitting it.¹⁰² In this perspective, a document’s canonical status was not dependent upon it being a particular text type. Thus, even contested parts of the text, such as the *PA*, were considered part of the canon, “as far as some early churches were concerned,” particularly in those

⁹⁶Bruce, *Canon*, 288–289.

⁹⁷Kent D. Clarke, “Original Text or Canonical Text” in *Translating the Bible, Problems and Progress*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Richard S. Hess, JSNTSup 173 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 299.

⁹⁸Metzger, *Canon*, 269.

⁹⁹J. K. Elliot, “Manuscripts, the Codex and the Canon,” *JSNT* 19.63 (1997): 112–113.

¹⁰⁰Metzger, *Canon*, 270.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 269–270.

regions in which the Byzantine text type predominated.¹⁰³ Or, as Kent D. Clarke writes, the “original textual form or the exact textual form of the New Testament was not a priority for the finalization of the canon.”¹⁰⁴ It was the larger literary units, not the particular text, that was considered canonical.

This perspective could be used to argue for the canonicity of the *PA*. It has, after all, been considered as part of the canon since it first appeared in John and was accepted in a number of different faith communities, fulfilling the criteria, to some extent, of corporate reception. Yet, further reflection gives pause to this conclusion. While the canonization process did not prescribe a particular text, neither did it stabilize the text. In other words, the fact that, as the church recognized which books were canonical, it did not demand a specific text type illustrates the point that the text was treated as fluid at that time. Clarke points out that “there is not one single canonical text but a diversity of canonical texts; nor is there one final ecclesiastical form of text.” The question at issue is, can changes, whether interpolations or omissions to a biblical text, be legitimized by the canonization process? Clarke argues that the answer is no, and that these decisions must be made on the basis of text-critical studies. These studies have largely weighed against the *PA* being considered as original to the Gospel of John.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, it is not the canonization process that adjudicates between the competing text types, this is the domain of textual criticism. Nevertheless, this perspective presupposes a community-based model of canon, in which the church decides which books are canonical. One could argue differently, namely a large segment of the church has accepted the controverted passage as canonical, and that decision should be determinative.

However, Clarke does put forth a strong argument that will clearly be embraced by those who give priority to the work of textual criticism. Clarke raises the question as to why a textual addition should be considered canonical, even if a certain community considers the passage part of their canon, if it was not part of the original autograph.¹⁰⁶ If the attempt to reconstruct an original text was abandoned, at what point would scholars stop accepting additions to the text?¹⁰⁷ Despite the ancient character and apparent historicity of the *PA*, it should not be part of the canon if it fails to pass the criterion of apostolic authority, a criterion that arises even among different models. From a canonical perspective, the book of John has been accepted. It now becomes a text critical question as to what is the best representation of John. Burge concludes that the *PA* cannot be part of the canon if it was not written by an inspired, authoritative author,¹⁰⁸ failing to pass the inherent scriptural criteria of apostolic origins.

¹⁰³Eldon Jay Epp, “Issues in the Interrelation of the New Testament Textual Criticism and Canon,” in *The Canon Debate*, 513.

¹⁰⁴Clarke, “Original Text,” 304.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 309–310.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁰⁸Burge, “Specific Problem,” 148.

From the stance of the textual critic, additions to the text (and this would include the *PA* if it is viewed as an interpolation) would not be considered canonical. From the perspective of a community using a canonical text that includes the passage, it already is canonical by virtue of being part of the text. Hence, the knot becomes more firmly tied.

If one accepts the position that the text-critical issues are determinative for inclusion in the canon, then the aim to find the original text should bear sway. It also needs to be recognized that this conclusion has not always prevailed within Christianity. Early Christianity thrived despite a situation in which different communities had different versions of canonical books. Notwithstanding a “nonuniform scriptural basis,” the church was able to develop sound answers to deep theological questions, such as the relation of the Godhead.¹⁰⁹ Large segments of modern Christianity continue to exist with a “nonuniform scriptural basis,” as indicated by the great popularity of the KJV, in an age when new translations are multiplying prolifically,¹¹⁰ as well as by the fact that no critical edition of the Greek NT has been declared an authorized ecclesiastical text, nor does one appear to be on the horizon.

For many scholars, the textual question regarding the *PA* has been resolved with the conclusion that it is unquestionably an interpolation. On this basis of several canonical models, it should not be included in modern translations of the text. This has become the fate of other questionable passages that were determined to be insertions. The external evidence is clear regarding the passage; however, as indicated above, the internal evidence is not as strong as is often presented. As Keith’s works demonstrate, the passage fits well within the setting. Thus, linguistic style should not be seen as determinate for literary origins.¹¹¹ Heil also concludes, after examining the literary aspects of the text, that the *PA* fits within the narrative context. Based on this, he suggests that perhaps the external evidence should be reexamined.¹¹² While this reconsideration is taking place, and in light of the large acceptance of the *PA* by a majority of Christianity, it would seem prudent to refrain from demanding the passage’s removal from all new versions, including notes, and banishing it from a preacher’s material. This path would be more ecumenical in nature, as well as being more in harmony with the Church’s historic approach to canonical texts. However, before a final adjudication of the passage can be made, a broad consensus needs to be formed on exactly which canonical model and criteria are to be used in determining the fate of the pericope.

¹⁰⁹Baum, “Canonical Authority,” 177.

¹¹⁰The KJV was recently identified as the most popular translation. See Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “The Most Popular and Fastest Growing Bible Translation Isn’t What You Think It Is,” *Christianity Today* 58.2 (2014): n.p., <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/march/most-popular-and-fastest-growing-bible-translation-niv-kjv.html>.

¹¹¹Keith, “Attentive Insertion,” 103.

¹¹²Heil, “Story of Jesus,” 182–191. See also Wallace, “Reconsidering ‘The Story of the Jesus and the Adulteress Reconsidered,’” *NTS* 39.2 (1993): 290–296; Heil, “A Rejoinder,” 361–366.

Pastoral Concerns

Given this background, how should the pastor relate to the account? As noted above, many advocate for its total removal from new Bible editions. However, until such an edition is printed and becomes popular, the pastor will need to think through how to relate to the passage. Two opposite positions would be to either continue to preach it, ignoring any textual difficulties, or discount the passage altogether. Neither of these positions will best serve the interests of the congregation. To preach from the passage without acknowledging its background in some measure may inadvertently create a situation of distrust when the parishioner learns of its contested position in the Bible. This is exactly Wallace's concern, namely that church members might lose faith when confronted with questions over the accuracy of their Bible. While the pastor may think the average church member has no interest in the historical transmission of the Bible, Bart Ehrman's best-selling book, *Misquoting Jesus*, demonstrates that this is not true. Therefore, while it is not recommended that the preacher run through all the MS evidence during his or her sermon, short explanations can be given to help the members realize that there are still unanswered questions.

Since the *PA* is widely considered to be historical, the passage can also be preached in reference to other texts. For example, it can be used as an illustration of freedom from condemnation, as other true stories are used to illustrate Bible principles. Some may counter this usage of the passage by arguing that pastors shouldn't use the Johannine *comma* (1 John 5:7, KJV), since it is not original nor inspired, even though it teaches a truth.¹¹³ To this I would reply that the two passages are very different. The *PA* is widely considered to be a historical account that took place in the life of Jesus, even if it was not recorded by John. It is referenced in a positive manner by the early *Protevangelium Iacobi*. This is not the case for the Johannine *comma*, which finds its earliest attestation in the eighth century in a Latin text. The earliest Greek text in which it is found is in the fifteenth century (apparently influenced by the Vulgate); and it was never referenced by the Church Fathers, despite the many polemics against Arianism.¹¹⁴ To the contrary, as Knust argues, the *PA* was always gospel "to a community of Christians somewhere."¹¹⁵ The most ancient Christians appreciated the story and its lessons, despite its textual history.

Furthermore, the approach to utilize the passage, despite its textual background has long been a perspective embraced by scholars who are deeply committed to the integrity of God's word. For example, Calvin wrote the

¹¹³For a discussion of Erasmus's inclusion of the *comma* in his work, see Joseph M. Levine, "Erasmus and the Problem of the Johannine Comma," *JHI* 58.4 (1997): 573–596.

¹¹⁴Margalit Finkelberg, "The Original Versus the Received Text with Special Emphasis on the Case of the *Comma Johanneum*," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 21.3 (2014): 193. It is recognized that it was probably inserted into the Latin text around the fifth century.

¹¹⁵Knust, "Adulteress," 75.

following concerning the passage: “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.”¹¹⁶ It is in this light that S. Lewis Johnson recognized the textual history, yet was still comfortable preaching the passage. “[I]t 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.”¹¹⁷ Either ignoring the passage or its interesting background both appear to be unwarranted.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. William Pringle, 2 vols., Calvin’s Commentaries 34–35 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 34:319.

¹¹⁷S. Lewis Johnson, “The Woman Taken in Adultery, or Misery and Mercy,” *SLJ Institute*, <http://sljinstitute.net/gospel-of-john/the-woman-taken-in-adultery-or-misery-and-mercy-2/>.

¹¹⁸While perhaps not a concern for the broader scholarly community, some might have an interest in the relationship between the insights of Ellen G. White, a respected and influential voice within Seventh-day Adventism, and the passage under consideration. White clearly recognized that textual discrepancies existed and that some of these were intentional. See Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1945), 220. This is certainly the case with the passage under consideration. In her influential treatment on the life of Christ, *The Desire of Ages*, she records the events found in the *PA* and treats them as part of John’s larger narrative (*The Desire of Ages* [Mountain View, CA, 1898], 460–462). She also identifies what Jesus wrote with his finger, stating that he revealed the “guilty secrets” and “hidden iniquity” of the woman’s accusers. The ninth century Constantinopolitan Codex Nanius of the Gospels (U 030), includes, within the text, the detail that Christ wrote the sins of these accusers. See Jennifer Knust and Tommy Wasserman, “Earth Accuses Earth: Tracing What Jesus Wrote on the Ground,” *HTR* 103.4 (2014): 408. However, while we have a textual variation that supports White’s insight, this does not indicate that John originally wrote it. The textual evidence is too strong against such a conclusion. While the two examples are different in scope and detail, they together illustrate a principle. Simply because White describes an event as taking place does not mean that her writings should be used to determinately settle textual questions. Her inclusion of the content of what Jesus wrote, paralleled by a ninth century text, is not the basis for making text critical decisions. White was not writing as a textual critic, but as one who wanted to share the story of Christ’s life. In a similar vein, one can examine the way in which she wrote *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911). In the introduction to the book, she stated that she experienced the Spirit of God opening to her mind events both past and future. In describing historical events, she selected and grouped events, in order to highlight how God brought testing truths at different times in earth’s history. In some places she utilized a historian’s thoughts and words, as they provided a good presentation of the topic. She was also open to these historical references being corrected if the need should arise. This turned out to be the case in a few instances. When the book was being reprinted in 1911, White asked her co-worker, W. W. Prescott to read through the book and recommend any changes he thought necessary. He responded with over one hundred suggestions, which were reviewed by White and her staff, accepting some and rejecting others.

As John clearly stated, if everything Jesus did was written down, there would not be enough room to contain the accounts (John 21:25). Recognizing the historical nature of the *PA*, its impact on the life of the church, and its transformative power in the lives of church members, the pastor should distinctly proclaim the truth that the story unfolds. “Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more” is a message that needs to be continually repeated, despite the fact that all of the issues related to the account are not fully resolved.

See Arthur L. White, “W. W. Prescott and the 1911 Edition of *The Great Controversy*,” Ellen G. White Estate, 3 February 1981, <http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/GC-Prescott.html>. In this instance, White demonstrated that, when dealing with historical matters, she did not consider herself a historian, and was willing to adjust her writings as necessary. Textual criticism is surely a separate discipline, but it is not unreasonable to assume that she would recognize her limitations in this area of specialty and, therefore, would not want her writings to be used to determine such disputes.