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Could it be Reasonable to Conclude that Jesus Did it and John Wrote it Down? An Enquiry into the Veracity of John 7:53-8:11, the Pericope Adulterae

Abstract

Broadly speaking, two types of answers to the question of whether John 7:53-8:11, the *Pericope Adulterae* (PA) should be considered part of the authentic biblical text have been offered by scholars. The first type includes those who conclude the PA does not report an actual account in the life of Jesus and should not be in the Bible. The second type comes from those who argue that the PA does present an account from the life of Jesus and should be in the Bible (although not all in the last group agree that the account is of Johannine origin). For the present purpose, two advocates of the first type of answer to the question of the PA's authenticity are discussed; from the non-Christian perspective, Barth Ehrman, and from the Christian perspective, Daniel Wallace. Both of their views will be briefly presented, followed by an argument against their perspective and in favor of the PA. Findings will suggest that historical evidence (what will be referred to below as external reasons), as well as linguistic and literary evidence (what will be referred to below as exegetical reasons) support the PA's inclusion in the biblical canon as reasonably defensible and that it should be considered a bona fide part of divine revelation given through John.

Keywords

pericopae adulterae, John 7:53-8:11, woman caught in adultery

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction: The Significance of the *Pericope Adulterae*

“He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.”¹ These are the words of John 8:7, and they appear in nearly every translation of the Gospel of John available today. Reported to have been spoken by Jesus in response to a dramatic encounter with the Pharisees and a woman they alleged to have been “caught in adultery” (John 8:3), this statement and the words of the broader pericope (John 7:53-8:11) provide readers with poignant and challenging insight into the relationship between Jesus, his opponents, and his ministry as the “only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Who does not find comfort in the thought that here is Jesus, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), standing as a merciful intermediary between religious leaders intent on catching him in some violation of the Mosaic law and a woman publicly exposed and at risk of death? Many are the preachers whose sermons have included this story as part of a larger emphasis on the kindness and goodness of God, his unfailing mercy shown through Jesus, and the radical distinction between those seeking a hostile justice and those offering a second chance.

Further, think what would have transpired that day if the intention of the Pharisees had been realized, if the woman had been condemned by Jesus and a death sentence of stoning had been carried out. Adam Clarke describes what was likely the Jewish practice of capital punishment carried out by stoning at the time of Jesus: “The culprit, half naked, the hands tied behind the back, was placed on a scaffold, ten or twelve feet high; the witnesses, who stood with her, pushed her off with great force: if she was killed by the fall there was nothing farther done; but, if she was not, one of the witnesses took up a very large stone, and dashed it upon her breast, which generally was...the finishing stroke.”² A more jarring and horrific description is difficult to imagine, and yet this is the situation John 7:53-8:11 presents in what has come to be known as the *Pericope Adulterae* (hereafter PA, except in instances of research headings).³

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

² Adam Clarke, *Commentary on John* (Titus Books, n.d.), chap. 8, Kindle.

³ This is the Latin rendering (trans. section/lection on adultery). A pericope is “a selection or extract from a book; [a] lection.” Dictionary.com, s.v. “pericope,” accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/pericope?s=t>.

But is this account of mercy triumphing over judgment supposed to be in the Bible? Is it actually part of the original content of John's gospel? Surely, if this passage were not in the original manuscripts, it would not have made it into the biblical canon, correct? After all, the contents of Bible translations used today are a faithful representation of the original documents. Right? Not all are agreed. Some of Christianity's most virulent and capable critics have not only challenged the legitimacy of the account as part of John's gospel but have gone from questioning the passage to doubting the reliability of the entire biblical corpus. Criticism against the PA has also been made by those within the Christian camp and by some of evangelical Christianity's most respectable scholars.⁴ Is it possibly true that the PA is neither something John wrote nor an actual account of the life and ministry of Jesus? Is the PA not supposed to be in the Bible at all? If the critics of the PA are correct in their assessment, then its inclusion in the Bible and the assumption of most Bible-believing Christians that it is actually part of divine revelation appears to pose a formidable dilemma for those who want to affirm, on the one hand, that God's Word is without error and reliable in all it teaches (to include the scope and content of the canonical books), and who, on the other hand, wish to take seriously the criticisms offered by the Bible's detractors. What, then, should be done about this alleged addition to John's gospel?

Broadly speaking, two types of answers to this question have been offered by scholars. The first type includes those who conclude the PA does not report an actual account in the life of Jesus and should not be in the Bible. The second type comes from those who argue that the PA does present an account from the life of Jesus and should be in the Bible (although not all in the last group agree that the account is of Johannine origin). For the present purpose, two advocates of the first type of answer to the question of the PA's authenticity are discussed; from the non-Christian perspective, Barth Ehrman, and from the Christian perspective, Daniel Wallace. Both of their views will be briefly presented, followed by an

⁴ Regarding a more thorough discussion of the in-house debate among Christian scholars on the topic, Steven Grabiner reports the following: "On 25–26 April 2014, [Southeastern] 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." (Grabiner, "Pericope Adulterae: A Most Perplexing Passage," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 1: 91). The volume Grabiner refers to is David Alan Black and Jacob N. Cerone, eds. *The Pericope of the Adulteress in Contemporary Research*, LNTS 551 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016). It should be noted, however, that the disagreement among Christian scholars on the matter is not a disagreement concerning the reliability of Scripture, but on this particular instance of canonical formation sans any concern for deeper, systemic canonical corruption.

argument against their perspective and in favor of the PA. Findings will suggest that historical evidence (what will be referred to below as external reasons), as well as linguistic and literary evidence (what will be referred to below as exegetical reasons) support the PA's inclusion in the biblical canon as reasonably defensible and that it should be considered a bona fide part of divine revelation given through John.

An Answer to the Challenge to the *Pericope Adulterae*

The Challenge

Possibly one of the most outspoken contemporary critics of Christianity, and especially the reliability of the Bible, is New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.⁵ In his article, "Jesus and the Adulteress," Ehrman is no stranger to the discussion over the authenticity of the PA, and his criticism of it is clear in the following excerpt from his article, "Jesus and the Adulteress," which appeared in the journal *New Testament Studies* in 1988:

By the fourth century there were actually three extant versions of the PA: (1) the entrapment story in which Jesus freely pardons a sinful woman, known to Papias and the author of the *Didascalia*, (2) the story of Jesus' intervention in an execution proceeding, preserved in the Gospel according to the Hebrews and retold by Didymus in his Ecclesiastes commentary, and (3) the popular version found in MSS of the Gospel of John, a version which represents a conflation of the two earlier stories.⁶

Ehrman also made the following claims concerning the PA in an interview on National Public Radio in 2005:

⁵ "Bart D. Ehrman," The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Department of Religious Studies, accessed November 29, 2019, https://religion.unc.edu/_people/full-time-faculty/ehrman/.

⁶ Bart Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 37. See also Ehrman *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 63-65.

As it turns out...this story was not original.... The earliest manuscripts we have of John don't have the story.... In the Middle Ages, apparently a scribe...wrote it down in the margin of a [manuscript]. And some other scribe came along and saw this story in the margin...and then transferred it into the [manuscript] itself.... And from then on that [manuscript] got copied...and one of the subsequent copies...was used then by the [King James Version] translators...but it would not have been known at all to Greek reading Christians...in the ancient world.⁷

From these quotations Ehrman's argument may be summarized as follows:

- P1. There are a few versions of this story by the time of the fourth century;
- P2. But the story is not in the earliest manuscripts of John's gospel;
- P3. And the story would not have been known to the earliest Greek reading Christians;
- P4. So, the story as it is now is from the pen of a scribe during the Middle Ages;
- C. Therefore, the story is not part of the Bible.

Another critic of the PA is Daniel Wallace, Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary and a well-known and respected scholar in Christian academia, known for his expertise in the text of the New Testament.⁸ When it comes to the PA, Wallace not only doubts its Johannine authenticity, but considers it an interpolation that should be excised from the canon of scripture. In describing Wallace's approach to the PA, Grabiner explains that "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 translation, nor be part of a pastor's preaching."⁹ Wallace, writing to express his substantial agreement with Ehrman that the PA ought not be

⁷ "Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*," Terry Gross, Fresh Air, aired December 14, 2005, on NPR. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5052156>. In addition to their standard grammatical usage, the ellipses represent Ehrman's frequent use of "um" and "uh" and are included here for smoother reading of the transcript. See also "Ehrman on John 8:1-11," The Nazaroo Files: Dupes and Scoundrels, accessed November 28, 2019, <http://textualcriticism.scienceontheweb.net/DUMB/Ehrmin.html#s04>.

⁸ "Daniel B. Wallace," Faculty, Dallas Theological Seminary, accessed November 25, 2019, <https://www.dts.edu/people/daniel-wallace/>.

⁹ Grabiner, 103.

considered part of John's gospel or part of the biblical canon, states, "Ehrman is to be thanked for giving us a wake-up call" regarding the illegitimacy of the PA.¹⁰ In another instance, Wallace declares, "I am calling for translators to remove [the PA] from the Gospel of John and relegate it to the footnotes. Although this will be painful and will cause initial confusion, it is far better that laypeople hear the truth about scripture from their friends than from their enemies. They need to know that Christ-honoring, Bible-believing scholars also do not think that this text is authentic, and that such a stance has not shaken their faith one iota."¹¹ Mindful that there are those with whom he agrees about the divine inspiration of scripture but who do not agree with Ehrman (and therefore with him) about the PA, Wallace holds to his conviction, even elevating his critique to include the possibility that affirming the PA entails a diminution of the integrity of the doctrine of the Incarnation:

Much is thus at stake when it comes to a text such as the story of the woman caught in adultery. What is at stake is not, as some might think, the mercy of God; rather, what is at stake is how we view the very Incarnation itself. Ironically, if we allow passages into the Gospels that do not have the best credentials, we are in fact tacitly questioning whether the Lord of the Gospels, Jesus Christ himself, became man, for we jettison

¹⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, "The Gospel According to Bart: A Review Article of *Misquoting Jesus* by Bart Ehrman," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49/2 (June 2006): 337.

¹¹ Wallace, "My Favorite Passage That's Not in the Bible," Bible.org, June 24, 2008, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://bible.org/article/my-favorite-passage-thats-not-bible>. Another critic of the PA from within the Christian camp is Andreas Kostenberger, who, although affirming a high view of inspiration and the authority entailed therein, concludes that "the [PA] account was almost certainly not part of the original Gospel. If so, the pericope is not part of the canon and cannot claim divine inspiration. People may be edified by studying the passage, but conservatism would seem to all for omitting the passage from inclusion in the main body of translations, even within square brackets." ("John," in *The Holman Apologetics Commentary on the Bible: Gospels and Acts* (Nashville: Holman, 2013), Kindle, location 14853). An example of a Christian scholar who both affirms the reliability of the canon and the inclusion of the PA as authoritative though not Johannine (therefore, disagreeing with Kostenberger) is Kyle R. Hughes, who concludes that the PA is part of a pre-Gospel of Luke source, L, and that it does likely represent an actual account of Jesus' ministry which was added to John's Gospel for communal (possibly liturgical concerns related to early forms of lectionaries). See Hughes, "The Lukan Special Material and the Tradition History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," *Novum Testamentum* 55 (2013): 232-251. See also Bruce M. Metzger (see *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 189.

historicity in favor of personal preference. By affirming a spurious passage about him we may be losing a whole lot more than we gain.¹²

In addition to his historical critique of the PA, what may be called an external criticism, Wallace also makes a compelling argument against the linguistic and literary content of the PA, what may be dubbed an exegetical criticism. In this latter instance, Wallace concludes that claims that “(1) ‘there are striking linguistic links between the story and the Johannine narrative’ ...and (2) there is a ‘remarkable literary linkage that the story contributes to, rather than detracts from, the narrative progress in John 7-8’ ...fall short.”¹³ Thus, to summarize Wallace’s view (in keeping with the manner of summarizing Ehrman’s view above), it may be expressed as follows:

- P1. Ehrman is fundamentally right about the PA;
- P2. External critique demonstrates it is not historically reliable;
- P3. Further, exegetical critique demonstrates it is inconsistent with John’s other content on linguistic and literary grounds;
- P3. And to continue to insist on or allow its inclusion in the translations of the Bible, except as a footnote, is to tacitly call into question the veracity of the Incarnation;
- C. Therefore, the PA must not be allowed in John and must be declared non-canonical because it is not scripture.

Whether one agrees with Ehrman and Wallace, it is difficult to avoid the gravitas of their argument against the PA, especially for those Christians who rightly honor Wallace for his evangelical and scholarly commitments. Yet, there are those who refuse the call to reject the legitimacy of the PA, arguing that, contra Ehrman and Wallace, there is a cumulative case to be made—based on external and exegetical factors—in favor of the PA; both its canonical status and its Johannine authenticity. This is the answer that will be provided to the challenge to the PA, an answer that may be thought of as two strands that form

¹² Wallace, “My Favorite Passage.”

¹³ Wallace, “Reconsidering ‘The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress Reconsidered’,” *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 291. In this article Wallace replies to the argument of J. P. Heil, “The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress (John 7:53—8:11) Reconsidered,” *Biblica* 72 (1991): 182-191. The quotations with the quote are where Wallace is quoting Heil. Heil’s argument is summarized below as part of the evidence in favor of the PA.

one stronger cord when woven together. After all, “though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him.” (Eccl. 4:12). While neither argument is necessarily unassailable, the cumulative weight of their confluence offers (and the reader will have to decide whether to accept the offer) a reasonable basis for accepting the long-standing tradition of including the PA as part of the Johannine corpus and an authentically canonical.

An Answer

External Evidence for the *Pericope Adulterae*

In his commentary on John’s gospel, Edward Klink offers an excursus on the PA, wherein he details several pertinent issues regarding the disagreements over its authenticity, as well as why, for historical reasons the PA should remain a part of the biblical canon. He observes that while “there are several text-critical, interpretive, and pastoral issues that need to be addressed...the primary means of solidifying support for the pericope has been by historical criteria,” and that “the majority of interpreters seem to rest comfortably on its probable historical foundation.”¹⁴ Klink further offers that:

The argument [for the PA’s inclusion in scripture] goes as follows. Since the pericope can be shown to be ancient (rooted in the oral tradition that supplied our Gospels with raw materials) and authentic (matching the criteria used to determine what in the Gospels Jesus truly did and said), the text is deemed appropriate for Christian use and reflection. Its insertion into the Gospel of John suggests that earlier Christians deemed it likewise. It is used in every contemporary Christian tradition, sometimes without mention of its secondary and unoriginal status.¹⁵

While Klink is aware that there are those who reject the PA’s Johannine authorship, he further argues that “the pericope is in our Bibles...[and] has a long-standing presence in the heritage of the church which must be respected, even trusted to some degree.... That is, we need not deny the significance of its content

¹⁴ Edward W. Klink, *John*, a vol. in the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), Kindle location 10550-10574.

¹⁵ Klink, *John*, Kindle location 10574.

even if we have questions about its origin.”¹⁶ He then goes on to offer three reasons for this, which are summarized here.¹⁷

1. There are limits to textual criticism when it comes to determining a text’s validity with absolute certitude, and even the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament are dated after the events they record by at least two centuries. Even then, three of the four earliest manuscripts (ca. second to fourth century) show awareness of the PA via copyist marks.¹⁸
2. The universal inclusion of the PA in John’s gospel for the last more than 1,300 years offers a “kind of ecclesial argument, trusting in some limited capacity in the Spirit-guided decisions of the church, and behind the scenes, the providence of God.”¹⁹ This is not to place church tradition on an equal status with the authority of scripture, only to recognize that the church’s tradition has, for the majority of the church’s existence, openly and without rancor or division included the PA as part of the Bible.
3. There is a material and functional concern related to the inclusion of the PA in the canon and the doctrine of divine inspiration. Whereas textual critics are generally concerned with material concerns associated with specific words and phrases, authorship, provenance, and so on, the functional concern (i.e., what the text is accomplishing in a given instance, be it doctrinally or otherwise) cannot be overlooked. In the case of the PA, there is certainly a functional concern related to what the text reveals about Jesus, both who he is and what he does. Thus, rather than choosing either the material concern or the functional concern, the PA provides an instance when the functional is primary and, given that there is at least some

¹⁶ Ibid., Kindle location 10601.

¹⁷ See Ibid., Kindle location 10601-10652 for the detailed presentation of his three reasons.

¹⁸ See also “Ehrman on John 8:1-11,” The Nazaroo Files: Dupes and Scoundrels, accessed November 28, 2019, <http://textualcriticism.scienceontheweb.net/DUMB/Ehrmin.html#s04>, which explains that the presence of such copyist marks in these manuscripts does “not indicate interpolations [i.e., additions] or fraudulent insertions, but rather the existence of alternate readings. They rarely imply the text is in error.”

¹⁹ Klink, Kindle location 10626.

historical evidence to support its material concern, leads to a charitable, theologically-informed judgment to continue to grant the text the canonical legitimacy it has long received.

Summarily stated, there is historical evidence to make a reasonable choice to leave the PA where it has been for centuries, as part of the Gospel of John and as a key component in the historical understanding of the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Expressed in the form used with Ehrman and Wallace above, the external, historical evidence for the PA may be viewed as follows:

- P1. Criticisms notwithstanding, there are limits to what textual critics can know for certain regarding the PA;
- P2. And the PA does have manuscript attestation in the form of copyist notations that call attention to variant readings as early as the second century;
- P3. Further, there is a centuries-long historical precedent for accepting the PA as canonical and Johannine;
- P4. There is also the consistency of the PA with the general functional concern of the biblical text to reflect divine inspiration and therefore consistency with the remainder of the Bible;
- C. Therefore, there is an abductively-derived cumulative weight of the external evidence that leads to accepting its authenticity as a reasonable and likely best conclusion based on that evidence.

This is not to deny arguments contrary to its inclusion, only to affirm that a case can be made that it is not simply a matter of historical fact that the PA is inauthentic and should be considered non-canonical.

What, then, ought one to conclude regarding the historical evidence presented herein for the propriety of including the PA as part of the biblical canon? The reader will have to decide what to do with this external evidence, ultimately. There is, however, other evidence in favor of the legitimacy of the PA, both linguistic and literary, and specifically its recognition as genuinely Johannine. This is the second strand in the evidentiary cord, the exegetical evidence.

Exegetical Evidence for the *Pericope Adulterae*

As J. P. Heil, Professor of New Testament at the Catholic University of America argues, the exegetical evidence for the PA as canonical and specifically Johannine focuses on “explicit linguistic links of vocabulary and style as well as thematic literary links between [it] and John’s gospel which demonstrate that the [PA] contributes to rather than detracts from the narrative flow in John 7-8.”²⁰ This is relevant, especially, in light of the second aspect of Wallace’s argument against the PA above, namely, that the PA is inconsistent with the linguistic and literary flow of the remainder of John.²¹ In reply, selections from Heil’s presentation of exegetical evidence (i.e., linguistic and literary) in favor of the PA will now be briefly considered.

1. Linguistic Linkage: There are four instances where a linguistic linkage between the PA and other passages in John’s gospel exist, providing a reasonable basis for the PA’s Johannine authorship.
 - a. Jesus’ teaching in the Temple in 7:14 and 8:2: In both instances, Jesus is described as going “into the temple” (εἰς τὸ ἱερόν) and having “taught” (ἐδίδασκεν).²²
 - b. Narratorial asides in 6:6 and 8:6: In both instances the narrator presents an aside regarding the testing-nature of the action

²⁰ Heil, “The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress (John 7:53-8:11) Reconsidered,” Internal Evidence, The Nazaroo Files, accessed November 28, 2019, <http://textualcriticism.scienceontheweb.net/INT-EV/Heil1.html>. Adapted from Heil, “The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress (John 7:53-8:11) Reconsidered,” *Biblica* 72 (1991): 182-191. In addition to the work of Heil, which is the primary source referenced here, others arguing for the exegetical evidence for the PA include A. F. Johnson, “A Stylistic Trait of the Fourth Gospel in the Pericope Adulterae,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 9 (1966): 91-96; A. A. Trites, “The Woman Taken in Adultery,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (1974): 137-216; S. A. James, “The Adulteress and the Death Penalty,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (1979): 45-53; Z. C. Hodges, “The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11): The Text,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (1979): 318-332; and C. P. Baylis, “The Woman Caught in Adultery: A Test of Jesus as the Greater Prophet,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (1989): 171-184.

²¹ For Heil’s response to Wallace’s criticism of his initial article, see “A Rejoinder to ‘Reconsidering ‘The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress Reconsidered’ (John 7:53-8:11),” *Eglise et Theologie* 25 (1994): 361-366.

²² Greek translations are based on the text of the Gospel of John contained in the Morphological Greek New Testament (mGNT), accessed December 1, 2019, https://www.blueletterbible.org/mgnt/jhn/1/1/s_998001.

being described, and the “asides are nearly identical in vocabulary and style:

6:6 - τουτο δε ελεγεν πειραζον αυτον

8:6 - τουτο δε ελεγον πειραζοντες αυτον.”²³

- c. Use of “throw a stone” in 8:7 and 8:59: In both accounts the language of stone throwing is used by (8:7) and in reference to (8:59) Jesus.
 - 8:7 - επ αυτην βαλετο λιθον
 - 8:59 - λιθους ινα βαλωσιν επ αυτον
- d. Use of “sin no more” in 5:14 and 8:11: In both narratives, Jesus directs someone to “sin no more.”
 - 5:14 - μηκετι αμαρτανε
 - 8:11 - μηκετι αμαρτανε

- 2. Literary Linkage: As Heil explains, “In addition to the above noteworthy linguistic links between our story and the gospel there are literary considerations which indicate that our story is indeed not disruptive but actually plays a significant role in the narrative flow of John 7-8.”²⁴
 - a. Narrative sequence between 7:53 and 8:12: By including the PA, the flow of the story from the rejection of Jesus by the authorities (7:45-52) and the questioning of the Jesus by the Pharisees (8:13) is uninterrupted. However, if the PA is not in the original the reader is expected to accept that after the discussion without Jesus in 7:45-52, another discussion begins, almost as if mid-thought in 8:13, that includes Jesus; and without the PA, why is Jesus being asked to “bear witness” (8:13) regarding his identity and authority?
 - b. Plotting to arrest Jesus throughout 7 and 8: Beginning in 7:1, the religious authorities “sought” to kill Jesus, “sought” to find him (7:11), were asked by Jesus why did they “seek” to kill him (7:19), were described by inhabitants of Jerusalem as the ones who “seek” to kill him (7:25), and in 7:30 they “sought” to arrest him. The narrative builds, with the “chief priests sen[ding] officers to take Him” (7:32), and even some in crowd

²³ Heil, accessed November 28, 2019, <http://textualcriticism.scienceontheweb.net/INT-EV/Heil1.html>.

²⁴ Heil, accessed November 28, 2019, <http://textualcriticism.scienceontheweb.net/INT-EV/Heil1.html>. See also Baylis, “The Woman Caught in Adultery.”

“want[ing] to take Him” (7:45). Then, assuming the PA is properly placed in John’s gospel, after not being able to arrest Jesus, the authorities seek another means to justify his apprehending, this time by “testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him” (8:6). After all this, rather than condemn him, his words while addressing the drama associated with the woman caught in adultery lead to the authorities turning away, with John even explaining that after his dealings with the woman Jesus was challenged in the temple, but “no one laid hands on Him, for His hour had not yet come” (8:20). Finally, in 8:37, Jesus directly confronts the authorities regarding their intentions, telling them that he knows that they “seek to kill” him. The emphasis throughout is on killing Jesus, though if not by force and directly then by catching him in a misstep with the adulteress. Thus, rather than disrupting the literary flow from 7:1-8:59 (where they “took up stones to throw at Him”), the PA thickens the narrative and nests within the broader plot.

- c. Persistent questioning of Jesus’ teaching as a prophet: Heil explains that “another issue running through John 7-8 is that of Jesus as a prophetic teacher and the relation of his teaching to the law of Moses.”²⁵ One of the ways the authorities contrived as a basis for apprehending Jesus was to demonstrate he was a false prophet whose teaching was contrary to scripture. In 7:14-15 he is teaching, and the authorities “marveled, saying, ‘How does this Man know letters, having never studied?’” (7:15). Jesus points out that they want to kill him for having healed on the Sabbath (7:19-24), and then the authorities seek to dismiss him as legitimate because “no prophet has arisen out of Galilee” (7:52). The challenges to his teaching continue with the test vis-à-vis the woman caught in adultery (8:6), which flows right into another challenge in 8:12-20. Again, rather than disrupting the literary flow of the narrative, the PA offers an account that is consistent with the authorities’ challenge throughout.

²⁵ Heil, accessed November 28, 2019, <http://textualcriticism.scienceontheweb.net/INT-EV/Heil1.html>.

While other instances could be adduced (e.g., what Heil presents as “the appeal from sin to faith” and the “judging and condemning” themes also found in John 7-8 and with which the PA is consistent),²⁶ is it not reasonable to conclude that there is substance to the claim by Heil and others that the exegetical evidence drawn from the linguistic and literary elements before, during, and after the PA offer support consistent with the claim that the PA is authentically Johannine and canonical?²⁷ Again, the reader will decide, but it is worth summarizing here, in like-manner to the previous arguments, the exegetical evidence for the PA:

- P1. Rather than the language in the PA representing a marked departure from the surrounding text in John 7-8, there is linguistic evidence to support the claim of similarities between 7:1-52, 7:53-8:12 (i.e., the PA), and 8:13-59;
- P2. And, rather than the literary flow of John 7-8 being interrupted by the PA, there is literary evidence to support the claim of consistency of narrative flow and other concerns between the elements of John 7-8 that precede and follow the PA;
- C. Therefore, there is an abductively-derived cumulative weight of the exegetical evidence that leads to accepting its authenticity as a reasonable and likely best conclusion based on that evidence.

A Final Plea

The evidence presented here for the Johannine authenticity and canonicity of the PA, both external and exegetical, certainly does not adduce to absolute epistemological certainty (if such a thing exists!), and it could certainly be added to and refined. Epistemic humility demands admitting as much, but it also calls for—in the spirit of Christian charity—that those who disagree and are Christians also recover epistemic humility in these matters. Rather than making sweeping demands that there is no basis for including the PA in the Bible and that including it in future translations and teaching its content is tantamount to theological compromise at the most fundamental and serious level of the Incarnation, perhaps a more modest appraisal is apropos. If there is a reasonable, albeit abductively derived and cumulatively based argument in favor of the PA, such as the one

²⁶ Heil, accessed November 28, 2019, <http://textualcriticism.scienceontheweb.net/INT-EV/Heil1.html>.

²⁷ See footnote 20 for additional scholars making similar arguments.

presented here, then is it really likely that the matter of the PA's authenticity or inauthenticity is a clear, black-and-white matter?

Further, while it is true that truth must be followed wherever it leads, and if the truth is that the PA is illegitimate then it must be abandoned, as long as there is a plausible case for its veracity—especially given its historical place of significance in the Bible across denominations—then scholars need to admit as much. Why not subordinate, at least in this instance, the scholarly pining for an either-or conclusion on this matter to the pastoral wisdom that concludes it is unwise to hastily move an ancient boundary stone of this type? Give weight to the possibility that the PA is legitimately a part of scripture, or, at the least, take the counsel of Klink, who insightfully recommends the following approach:

This pericope should be treated as a text on probation, given full membership without loss of rights or privileges, yet serving as if on an extended apprenticeship (which has lasted now for thirteen-hundred years). Just as a person on probation is prohibited from serving in certain authoritative capacities, so also might this text be prohibited from making its own contribution to a doctrine or theological issue. It can be used in collaboration with other pericopae in a secondary and supportive role but should not serve in an independent and isolated position of authority for the church. Such an approach allows it to function according to its verifiable nature without denying material concerns. While it is recommended that the pastor or teacher declare the (material) probationary status of this pericope to the church, to take away its full (functional) rights and privileges, in our opinion, only does more harm than good and only causes more confusion than certainty.

The scholar in this researcher appreciates the epistemic humility this approach models, and the pastor in this researcher has a sense that this reflects best the concern for the truth of the Bible and the nurture and cure of the souls of God's people.

Conclusion

As stated in the introductory section, this research has focused on the argument for and against recognizing the *Pericope Adulterae*, John 7:53-8:11, as authentically Johannine and worthy of its current place in the biblical canon. Though there are reasonable and plausible arguments made by scholars—both Christian and non-Christian—for its exclusion, an attempt at a cumulative, abductive argument in favor of the passage has also been presented. Following

both external (historical) and exegetical (linguistic and literary) lines of presentation, the findings held forth here are that it is possible that the consensus of church history is correct, and the question and words following in John 8:10-11 that are attributed to Jesus at a time most troubling for all around him, not the least of which was the woman caught in adultery, are indeed true, “‘Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.’”

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