

Neither Forgery nor Fiction: Reconsidering the Woman Caught in Adultery

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ABSTRACT

The account of the woman caught in adultery, traditionally located in John 7:53–8:11, remains one of the most debated passages in the New Testament. This paper examines whether the Pericope Adulterae is original to the Gospel of John, whether it should be regarded as inspired Scripture, and how its textual uncertainty should shape theological interpretation. The study evaluates the earliest manuscript evidence, noting the passage's absence from key Alexandrian witnesses and its unstable location in later manuscripts. It also considers linguistic arguments against Johannine authorship, the narrative disruption between John 7:52 and 8:12, and the historical reception of the passage among early Christian writers. While the evidence strongly suggests that the passage was not original to John's Gospel, this conclusion does not require dismissing the account as fraudulent, theologically dangerous, or spiritually worthless. Patristic references indicate that a story of Jesus and an accused woman circulated early within Christian tradition, even before its later stabilization in the Johannine textual tradition. This paper argues that the Pericope Adulterae is best understood as non-Johannine yet deeply Christian: a historically valued tradition that reflects the mercy, wisdom, and grace of Christ while requiring careful handling in preaching, doctrine, and textual criticism.

Keywords: *Pericope Adulterae; John 7:53–8:11; Textual Criticism; Johannine Authorship; Manuscript Evidence; Biblical Inspiration; Patristic Reception; Woman Caught in Adultery*

INTRODUCTION

Is the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery inspired? Is the passage genuinely part of John's Gospel, or was it added later, and if so, why? The account of the woman caught in adultery, found in the Gospel of John (7:53–8:11), raises questions about its position within the text. Since it is included in the New Testament codices, one might naturally assume it belongs to the canon, like any other passage. However, this assumption warrants deeper examination: is it an authoritative passage that was accepted, or later included, in an official list of canonical texts? Such questions can lead to circular reasoning, highlighting the need for focused research to untangle these complexities.

To address this, the following analysis will concentrate on several components: first, the textual evidence supporting or disputing its origins; second, the reliability and probable date of the Fourth Gospel itself, upon which this study leans heavily; third, the middle ground proponents and the linguistic features that set the passage apart from the Johannine style; and finally, its theological significance and value within the canon. This structured approach clarifies the passage's authenticity and its contribution to the Gospel narrative.

Despite its controversial nature, the reader must address this subject without credulity. It is essential to resist the instinctive tendency to assume that if something exists, it is inherently valid. Instead, the intent is to consider the burden of proof and recognize whose shoulders that responsibility lies on. Research and scholarship are not guided by personal desires or preferences but by the pursuit of evidence-based truth and rigorous inquiry.

On Textual Evidence and Manuscript History

“No other passage in the New Testament presents such complex textual problems.” The earliest Greek manuscripts (P⁶⁶, P⁷⁵, x, and B) omit the passage entirely. Ehrman observes that the story first appears consistently in Greek manuscripts only after the fifth century. When it does appear, its location varies, with some manuscripts placing it after John 7:36, after 7:44, or even after Luke 21:38. While that fact is solidified, gauging whether a text is Johannine and gauging whether it is inspired are two different debates. Proving or disproving John's authorship does not automatically prove or disprove its divine origin. Dr. Ehrman emphasizes that the story appears in different manuscripts, sometimes in Luke rather than John, demonstrating scribal uncertainty about its proper location.

The scope of that omission is worth stating plainly, because it is the single strongest datum in the entire discussion. The pericope is absent not merely from a manuscript or two but from the earliest and best representatives of the Alexandrian tradition, from the early Coptic and Old Syriac versions, and from the commentary tradition of the Greek fathers. Origen in the third century and Chrysostom in his homilies on John both move directly from 7:52 to 8:12 as though the intervening verses were not there. Where later scribes do include the passage, they frequently mark it with obeli or asterisks, the copyist's own signal that its authenticity was doubted, a scribal habit David Parker documents in detail. The editorial committee behind the standard critical Greek text assigned the shorter reading, without the pericope, its highest level of certainty. The cumulative weight is such that the burden of proof falls squarely on anyone who would defend the passage as original to John.

In addition, textual linguistics presents an even greater challenge to the question of Johannine authorship. The evidence is overwhelming that it does not belong to John; indeed, one would be lending oneself to credulity to argue otherwise. C. K. Barrett addresses this issue by highlighting the striking differences in vocabulary and syntax between this passage and the rest of John's Gospel. He concludes that the narrative disrupts the natural flow between John 7:52 and 8:12.

Similarly, David Parker's analysis of scribal practices demonstrates how copyists treated this fluid textual tradition, often using asterisks or marginal notations to express their reservations about its authenticity. How might we assess this argument in terms of narrative fluidity while bracketing syntactic variations? A straightforward test would be to omit the pericope entirely and read directly from John 7:52 to 8:12, observing the resulting textual coherence. This approach yields a hermeneutical confirmation that independently substantiates the argument from plain reading without engaging in the debate over linguistic analysis.

Even if the questions surrounding John's authorship were definitively settled, the historical significance of the passage would still be a topic of discussion. While these uncertainties remain, scholars seeking to assess the narrative's historical value independently of its linguistic features would need to adopt an entirely different methodological approach. Craig Keener argues that while critical evidence challenges Johannine authorship, the story's content closely aligns with the characteristics of Jesus, specifically his mercy and his challenge to legalism.

The impartial scholar must acknowledge that the authenticity of this narrative cannot resolve substantive creedal disputes. The accusation of deliberate forgery becomes untenable when we consider the absence of demonstrable motive, particularly given its fifth-century provenance, which postdates the significant Christological controversies of earlier centuries. The responsible scholar must navigate textual disputes with nuance, avoiding the temptation to dismiss contested passages entirely. The middle-ground approach is a respectable alternative, used as a means of care.

On the Dating and Reliability of the Fourth Gospel

Because this study leans so heavily upon the Fourth Gospel, the reliability and probable date of John itself deserve comment, if only to clarify what is and is not at stake when the Pericope Adulterae is set aside as a later addition. A significant minority of scholars, following John A. T. Robinson's *Redating the New Testament* (1976), has argued that John was composed earlier than the conventional date of roughly AD 90 to 100, perhaps even before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Three internal observations are commonly marshaled in support.

First, the Pool of Bethesda. In John 5:2 the narrator writes that in Jerusalem there “is” (Greek *estin*, present tense) a pool with five porticoes. Because the monumental twin-pool complex was buried when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in AD 70, proponents argue that the present tense reflects a setting the author still regarded as standing, and therefore that the composition predates the siege. Excavations near the Church of Saint Anne have confirmed a five-porticoed pool matching the Johannine description, a detail once dismissed as a symbolic invention, lending the narrator concrete topographical knowledge of pre-70 Jerusalem. Critics reasonably respond that the present tense may be historical or timeless, so the observation is suggestive rather than decisive.

Second, the silence regarding the Temple. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, which record Jesus' prediction of the Temple's fall, John nowhere references the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70. Proponents of an early date read this silence as evidence that the event had not yet occurred at the time of writing. As with all arguments from silence, this observation carries only modest weight, yet it coheres with the Bethesda datum.

Third, the future tense concerning Peter. In John 21:19 the narrator glosses Jesus' words as an indication of the death by which Peter would glorify God, language that reads most naturally if Peter's martyrdom, traditionally dated to AD 64 to 67 under Nero, still lay in the future when the words were written.

None of these arguments, individually or together, compels an early date, and the majority position continues to place John near the end of the first century. They are noted here for a narrower purpose. Whatever date one assigns to the Gospel, the earliest physical witnesses to John, the Rylands fragment P52 and the near-complete codices P66 and P75, already circulate within roughly a generation or two of composition and preserve a stable text, and none of these early witnesses contains the Pericope Adulterae. The reliability of John as a whole and the secondary status of this one pericope are therefore not in tension. The Gospel can be early, well-attested, and faithfully transmitted, while the story of the adulteress remains a later insertion because the manuscript evidence bearing on the two questions is simply different. Recognizing that distinction is what allows the present study to affirm the Fourth Gospel with confidence and still conclude that these particular twelve verses arrived by another road.

On the Fence

On any given subject, we can expect scholarship to adopt tentative positions, some arguing “it could be” and others “it might not be,” which risk being dismissed as evasive rather than engaging the issue with due diligence. Those who seek middle ground often take refuge in plausible deniability, avoiding firm commitment to any labeled camp.

D. A. Carson acknowledges the textual problems while affirming that the Church has rightly cherished the story for its profound Christological insight. While this perspective offers a reassuring tone, it does not sufficiently grapple with the practical implications of handling the passage. Though we may concur with Carson's assessment, and acknowledge the narrative's cherished status, this recognition alone fails to resolve the critical question of its proper theological and exegetical application.

The problem arises when the passage is presented or sermonized in a proper homily. When the expositor reaches it, what should he do rather than preach it verse by verse? Perhaps the alternative at that point is to have a serious discussion on textual criticism, or to write a research paper for a lay audience that would undoubtedly cure insomnia. Nevertheless, the middle-ground expositor is responsible for disclosing the text's historical controversy if he is to be seen as an honest broker.

On Linguistics

C. K. Barrett observes that the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53–8:11) exhibits non-Johannine vocabulary and syntax, and that its placement disrupts the reader's flow between John 7:52 and 8:12. This suggests the passage was a later interpolation rather than an original component of the Fourth Gospel. Barrett's conclusion aligns with the longstanding scholarly consensus, as early church evidence similarly questions the pericope's authenticity.

Augustine (*De Adulterinis Conjugiis* 2.6) acknowledged its absence in many manuscripts, theorizing that some scribes expurgated it to avoid scandal. However, Augustine's hypothesis raises questions. What specific scandal warranted its removal? Unlike other contested passages such as the Comma Johanneum, no doctrinal substitutions or harmonizations appear in its place. As Barrett and later textual critics have noted, the pericope's irregular transmission history predates Augustine's era, indicating that doubts about its authenticity were not novel even in patristic times. To argue that it should or should not be canonized strictly because it interrupts the fluidity of the narration is a more subjective approach than literary objection allows. One cannot simply stand on the reader's shoulders to reach a definitive conclusion.

It is not an insult to the text's inspiration, or to its lack thereof, to exercise intellectual honesty and conclude that the passage is, strictly speaking, a later addition to the Gospel of John from a linguistic viewpoint. Given the cumulative weight of linguistic and historical evidence against the Johannine authorship of the Pericope Adulterae, a critical theological question arises: how should this textual uncertainty inform our interpretation of the passage's doctrinal significance?

On Theology

While the passage exemplifies radical grace, its truth value does not inherently negate prior theological claims. If the text is false, it does not logically follow that earlier teachings are invalidated; if it is true, it further illuminates the Christological theme of transcendent grace. For instance, Craig Keener observes that Jesus simultaneously affirms the righteousness of the Law while subverting its misuse as a tool of oppression against the marginalized.

Although the language of this passage may not align perfectly with specific theological structures, its message remains harmonious with John's overarching theme, which emphasizes the deity of Christ and his display of grace. Richard Hays notes that John's Gospel consistently presents Jesus as the incarnate Word (John 1:1–14), reinforcing the theological unity of grace and Christology.

The problem of inevitable consequence raises questions about the text's inspiration. To address this, we must first establish a clear definition of inspiration and examine its theological foundations. The biblical understanding of inspiration asserts that Scripture is “God-breathed” (*θεόπνευστος*) and authoritative for faith and practice. Inspired Scripture is “living and active” (Heb 4:12), producing spiritual renewal. Calvin termed this the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit (*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*). While this nuanced definition offers valuable insight, it does not fully resolve the question of inspiration. Scholars remain divided; some insist on apostolic authorship as a prerequisite, while others propose alternative criteria. The debate persists without a definitive objective standard, and adjudicating between these positions risks oversimplifying a complex theological issue.

When subjected to close exegetical analysis, this passage demonstrates remarkable coherence with the Christological framework of Jesus' attributes. Consequently, efforts to adjudicate the passage's authenticity within John's Gospel using inspiration as the sole criterion are fundamentally inadequate. Given the available evidence, the most intellectually honest position is to acknowledge our inability to reach a collective conclusion regarding its inspired status.

Given that modern scholarship builds upon the work of earlier thinkers, a proper methodological approach requires careful examination of patristic writings to evaluate their perspectives on this matter. However, for this discussion, the early Church must be chronologically bounded by the fifth century, since the decisive evidence for manuscripts and reception clusters within that horizon.

On Historical Reception

The Pericope Adulterae first appears in the continuous textual record in Codex Bezae (fifth century AD) and subsequently in Byzantine manuscripts. Based on textual-critical analysis, scholars conclude with reasonable certainty that a scribe or editor inserted the passage into the Johannine tradition sometime between the second and fourth centuries A.D. This proposed timeframe aligns with evidence that the story circulated in oral tradition and early Christian teaching before its stabilization in later manuscripts.

That claim, that the pericope circulated as an independent tradition before its insertion, is not mere conjecture; it has support in the earliest patristic record. Eusebius reports (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.17) that Papias of Hierapolis, writing in the first half of the second century, related a story of a woman accused of many sins before the Lord, an account Eusebius connects to the Gospel according to the Hebrews. The third-century Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum* retells the episode in unmistakable terms, instructing bishops on mercy by appeal to the way the Lord dealt with the woman who had sinned. Didymus the Blind, writing around AD 350, refers to the account directly in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. Taken together, these witnesses indicate that a narrative of Jesus and an accused woman was known, told, and valued well before it achieved a fixed home in the manuscripts of John. The cumulative patristic testimony supports this study's central contention, that the story may be authentically ancient and genuinely dominical in substance even if it is not Johannine in origin.

This represents the prevailing scholarly consensus, and it is noteworthy that certain patristic authorities, including prominent Eastern Church Fathers, explicitly reference the passage in their writings. Their remarks suggest an awareness and acceptance of the Pericope Adulterae within segments of the early Christian tradition, even before its appearance in later manuscripts. Jerome included it in the Vulgate despite the textual variants. While we cannot interrogate Jerome directly about his editorial rationale, nor reconstruct the pericope's scribal history with precision, his deliberate inclusion of the passage in the Vulgate remains significant. Jerome was not alone in engaging with the text; multiple examinations and witnesses similarly acknowledged and preserved it, suggesting its established value within early Christian exegetical traditions. Augustine addressed this matter unequivocally, actively incorporating the Pericope Adulterae into his homiletical works. His usage served dual purposes: first, to condemn malicious acts of adultery, and second, to counter prevailing societal prejudices against women, particularly those unfairly branded as harlots. This application demonstrates Augustine's relatively advanced stance on the treatment of women in his historical context, as he drew on the passage to advocate for more compassionate treatment of the marginalized. His further suggestion (*De Adulterinis Conjugiis* 2.6) that some timid men removed the passage remains speculative, since no evidence supports deliberate excision. The Church Fathers' reception of the passage suggests they grappled with the same fundamental questions of authenticity and interpretation that confront modern scholars, demonstrating a historical continuity of textual-critical engagement. We may therefore cautiously presuppose that they were neither indifferent to the text nor dismissive of it on grounds of authorship alone.

While we stand on the shoulders of giants, we often appeal to their authority and acknowledge their consensus. However, in this instance, when we consult the Church Fathers, we find that they faced struggles like those the contemporary church faces today. We therefore gain no additional insight or clarity simply by considering the collected judgment of these early theologians, since their experience with the text was not fundamentally different from our own. The challenges they encountered persist just as they do now.

On Conclusions

Ultimately, this leaves us with a crux that might disappoint any reader examining the issue. To spoil the conclusion, I will assert that there are new thoughts to consider. The main takeaway, however, is the lack of credible evidence suggesting malicious intent, particularly considering the passage's appropriation in the fifth century. If there had indeed been a hidden agenda in its motives, we might expect it to have resolved some credible dispute, but it has resolved none.

What we do not see is Christ picking up a stone and whispering to a woman, “Where are your persecutors? For I am co-equal and co-eternal, existing in three persons within one divine essence; I am truly the Son of God, and I am God Himself. Therefore, worship me and leave your life of sin while joining the Missionary Baptist Church as the one true vessel of truth.” Instead, we see more of the same message: the Christ who came for the marginalized and the broken to dispense grace in abundance where grace had been absent.

There can be no doubt that the early theologians intended to vet the Scriptures properly to eliminate forgeries, striving to transmit the actual words of Christ as accurately as possible. I cannot concede that any single scholar has produced a fraudulent account that undermines this transmission.

If Scripture were as vulnerable to corruption as some suggest, we would not see the profound coherence and unity we find across the Gospels, or across any biblical text. Furthermore, to dismiss a passage as irrelevant or misplaced, simply because of its position in the text or its later inclusion, is to disregard the Holy Spirit's sovereign role in preserving and inspiring the canon. Such a claim denies the Spirit's authority and the God-breathed nature of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16).

No faithful interpreter can reject a text's authenticity merely because it appears later, especially when its message remains contextually sound and theologically consistent with the whole of revelation. The conclusion, therefore, is best summarized in no uncertain terms: “It may not be Johannine, but it is surely Christian” (F. F. Bruce).

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