

MY FAVORITE FAKE BIBLE PASSAGE (JN 7:53-8:11)

Jeremiah J. E. Wierwille

Last Updated: 01/12/2014

Copyright © 2013

Abstract — Textual scholars have long debated on whether or not John 7:53-8:11 is authentic or was a later addition to the text. By carefully weighing the known external and internal evidence, it is nearly unanimously affirmed by textual scholars that the *Pericope Adulterae* in John’s Gospel is not original. This article investigates the textual reliability of John 7:53-8:11 and some historical evidence relating to the passage.

General Research Topic(s) — The Gospel of John, Textual Criticism, Textual-Historical Studies.



Papyrus 66 of the Bodmer Papyri (P⁶⁶, c. 200).¹

¹ Page NB of P⁶⁶ contains the part of John’s Gospel omitting the *pericope adultrae*. The page begins with – NHEON completing the word EPAYNHSEON started on the previous page. Verse 52 ends on the right of line 2 with EGEIRETAI· and the punctuation mark. Following is the beginning of 8:12 ΠΑΛΙΝ ΟΥΝ ΑΥΤΟΙΣ ΕΛΑΛΗΣΕΝ Ο ΙC

»

I. INTRODUCTION

Most informed readers of Scripture are aware that there are some debates over parts of the Bible. It does not come as a shock that scholars discuss a word here or a word there in Scripture or maybe even a whole phrase at times. But, in general, few people know of larger sections of Scripture that are claimed as being authentic but under closer examination prove to be non-original. Probably the largest disputed section of Scripture that is deemed unauthentic by textual authorities is John 7:53-8:11, a passage commonly known as the *pericope adulterae*, or “Jesus and the Woman Taken in Adultery.”

This well-known passage of scripture in John’s gospel is affectionately loved by countless Christians as a paramount example of Jesus showing mercy to a woman who committed a grievous sin. For those familiar with the passage, they will remember how it depicts the composure and compassion of Jesus in the face of the haughty scribes and Pharisees. The story

(“Again therefore Jesus said to them”). Thus, the *pericope adulterae* in 7:53-8:11 is entirely omitted. A word order variant is typically indicated by a scribe with the double diagonal mark (//) or a similar notation above the suspected text but no such marks are found at the end of line 2 with regard to the *pericope adulterae*. However, a double diagonal mark is included in line 1 which indicates a variation in wording beginning with the preposition EK. See NA²⁷ (p. 273) regarding the noted variant.

goes that as Jesus is teaching in the temple, a group of scribes and Pharisees bring in a woman who they claim “had been caught in adultery” (8:1-4). These Jewish leaders were seeking to put Jesus to the test and to corner him about his teachings. They question Jesus as to what should be done with the woman seeing as the law dictates she should be stoned to death (v. 5). But to consent to the woman being stoned would go against his teaching on mercy and grace. In a brilliant turn of perspective, Jesus questions whether they have no sin themselves and then stoops down and writes in the ground (v. 6). Gradually, they realize their mutual guilt as well and depart (v. 9). And after the crowd leaves Jesus ask the woman “Has no one condemned you?” She replies, “No one, Lord.” Then, we read these most memorable words of Jesus, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and sin no more” (8:11).

Since the 16th century, this passage has found commonplace among English Bible versions. With such a long-standing tradition of Bible versions that include this beloved passage, why do I call it “My favorite FAKE Bible passage”? What right does anyone have to call it FAKE when it is in so many of our Bibles? However, many people argue with faulty logic along these lines: “If it is in my Bible then it must be genuine and part of God’s revelation to us and we have no right to take away or add to what God has said.” But I believe this is a false presumption that invests English Bibles with credit and authority they do not possess. Furthermore, such logic only proves the ignorance and naivety of the reader for what the Bible really is and how we got our translations today.

Thus, in this article I am going to present and discuss the ancient New Testament manuscripts containing John’s gospel in addition to the internal evidence of writing style and composition, and I am going to adduce that the evidence from these criteria is overwhelmingly definitive that this passage is not original (i.e., not authentic).

While scholars have long known of the poor textual credentials for the passage,² the culmination of textual inquiry on this section of Scripture really came to its fullest expression in the late 19th century. Two Cambridge scholars, Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1901) and Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828-1892), undertook a thorough study of the passage from the massive external and internal manuscript evidence and affirmed and defended with certainty the conclusion that 7:53-8:11 was not part of the original text of John’s Gospel.³

II. EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

So what is the textual evidence we have on the passage? To most people’s amazement, the passage does not appear in any Greek text until the 5th century in the eccentric manuscript Codex Bezae (D, c. 400).⁴ All of the earliest witnesses (2nd – 4th century), including two early papyri P⁶⁶ and P⁷⁵ (2nd cent.) as well as P^{39vid} (3rd cent.), do not contain the passage. Moreover, additional witnesses testifying against the genuineness of the pericope are very significant: Codex Sinaiticus (Σ, 4th cent.), Codex Vaticanus (B, 4th cent.), Codex Alexandrinus (A, 5th cent.), Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C, 5th cent.), Codex Washingtonianus (W, 5th cent.), Codex Borgianus (T, 5th cent.), as well as the important *Diatessaron* (2nd cent.) by Tatian and nearly all of the early church fathers.⁵ Regarding Codex Alexandrinus and Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus, they are actually missing the pages that contain the pericope in John’s

² For an in-depth review of major positions and arguments on the passage see Chris Keith, “Recent and Previous Research on the Pericope Adulterae (John 7.53-8.11),” *CBR* 6 (2008): 377-404.

³ Brooke F. Westcott and Fenton J. A. Hort, “Notes on Selected Readings,” in *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (Cambridge and London: Macmillan, 1882), 82-88.

⁴ Codex Bezae is a Greek-Latin diglot text. Perhaps the Latin tradition which seemed to include the pericope influenced the Greek text at this point.

⁵ Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2008), 286.

Gospel but according to the consistency of the letter size, width of lines, and lines per page, scholars have assuredly determined that they could not have contained such a large passage.⁶ And so they are listed among the definitive witnesses that exclude the verses. Beyond that, a diverse number of additional manuscripts omit the pericope: Codex Petropolitanus Purpureus (N, 6th cent.), Codex Regius (L, 8th cent.), Codex Athous Laurae (Ψ, 9th cent.), uncials 0141 and 0211, and a whole host of minuscules⁷ are among the vast witnesses that all lack the passage.⁸ Outside Codex Bezae, it is not until the 8th century that the passage begins to appear in Greek manuscripts. What is interesting about when the pericope begins to appear in the Greek texts is that it appears in several different locations. Sometimes begins after Luke 21:38, 24:53; John 7:36, 44, 52; 8:12, 13, 14, 20 and even at the end of John).⁹ Furthermore, oftentimes 8:1-11 appear without 7:53.

It would seem that the scribes copying the texts either found the passage in all these various locations or they did not all agree on where they thought it should be placed in the Gospel or even in a different Gospel. When the verses appear in a manuscript they are often accompanied by obeli or asterisks that indicate they are regarded as doubtful.¹⁰ John 7:53-8:11 is one such doubtful passage that is typically signaled with such a

mark. To add to the incredulity of the pericope, even when the verses do appear in manuscripts, they seldom all agree on the wording. The large number of variants found in the manuscripts where the passage does appear is further proof that its textual history differs from that of the rest of the Gospel.¹¹

When looking for references of the passage in commentaries or Christian writings the evidence again suggests it was a later addition to the text. For such a large section of Scripture it would be natural to find it commented upon in the writings of the Greek church fathers but this is not the case until very late. Bruce Metzger claims that “No Greek Church Father prior to Euthymius Zigabenus (twelfth century) comments on the passage, and Euthymius declares that the accurate copies of the Gospel do not contain it.”¹² Origen (died 253/254) does not comment upon the passage in his commentary on John, Tertullian (died after 220) does not mention it at all in his writings, John Chrysostom (died 407) cites many passages from John in his homilies but not the *pericope adulterae*, and Cyril of Alexandria (died 444) does not comment on it either in his full commentary on John.¹³

On the other hand, evidence of its earlier inclusion is found in the Latin text tradition. The passage appears in most Old Latin (also called *Itala* or *Vetus Latina*) manuscripts (it, 4th–12th cent.) and the Vulgate (vg, c. 384). Codex Fuldensis (F, c. 541) was based off the Vulgate and thus includes the passage as well. It appears in the *Didascalia* (c. 230), an early Christian treatise of the church much like the *Didache*, and some Western church fathers who followed the Latin text: Didymus the Blind (4th cent.), Ambrosiaster

⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 220.

⁷ Minuscule 3, 12, 15, 21, 22, 32, 33, 36, 39, 44, 49, 63, 72, 87, 96, 97, 106, 108, 124, 131, 134, 139, 151, 157, 169, 209, 213, 228, 297, 388, 391, 401, 416, 445, 488, 496, 499, 501, 523, 537, 542, 554, 565, 578, 584, 703, 719, 723, 730, 731, 736, 741, 742, 768, 770, 772, 773, 776, 777, 780, 799, 800, 817, 827, 828, 843, 896, 989, 1077, 1080, 1100, 1178, 1230, 1241, 1242, 1253, 1333, 2193 and 2768.

⁸ Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 220.

⁹ An entire family of manuscripts follows each pattern of locating the text in a different place. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 882-83. See Table 1 for list of known locations for the passage in Chris Keith, "The Initial Location of the Pericope Adulterae in Fourfold Tradition," *NovT* 51 (2009): 209-31.

¹⁰ Comfort, *Text and Translation*, 286.

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 883.

¹² Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 220.

¹³ Carl B. Bridges, "The Canonical Status of the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53-8:11)," *SCJ* 11 (2008): 213-21.

(4th cent.), Ambrose (died 397), John Chrysostom (died 407), Jerome (died 420), and Augustine (died 430).

In a letter from Ambrose of Milan (c. 385-87), he asserts that the *pericope adulterae* was quite familiar in Christian communities as he remarks, “Numerous times the question [regarding bishops’ involvement in secular courts] has been raised, and well known, too, is the acquittal of the woman who in the Gospel according to John was brought to Christ, accused of adultery.”¹⁴ But, in his last polemical work *Dialogus contra Pelagianos* (c. 415), Jerome also commented on the passage and claimed that it existed in many Greek and Latin copies, saying, “In the Gospel, according to John, there is found in many of both the Greek as well as the Latin copies, the story of the adulteress who was accused before the Lord.”¹⁵

In light of the overwhelmingly conclusive evidence, the Committee of the United Bible Societies was unanimous in their decision that the pericope is not an original part of John’s Gospel. However, with respect to the tradition and antiquity of the passage the UBS critical text (UBS⁴) and the Nestle-Aland critical text (NA²⁷) choose to include it in its most common location following 7:52 in double square brackets to notate its strong doubtful authenticity.

In summary, what can be concluded from the external evidence is that the *pericope adulterae* represents a western reading and of late origin.¹⁶ It is nearly undoubted that it was not original to the fourth Gospel (or any other).

¹⁴ Ambrose, *Ep.* 68 (Beyenka, FC); cp. *Ep.* 50. Cited in Chris Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 231.

¹⁵ Jerome, *Pelag.* 2.17 (Hritz, FC) cited in Keith, “The Initial Location of the Pericope Adulterae in Fourfold Tradition,” 220.

¹⁶ Bridges, “The Canonical Status of the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53-8:11),” 215.

III. INTERNAL EVIDENCE

Textual criticism is not solely based upon external evidence alone. Internal evidence is also vitally important to consider when evaluating the legitimacy of a particular word, phrase, or passage. Much like we do today, the expression of language in vocabulary, conjunctions, syntax, and style are all marks of authenticity within a writer’s vernacular and compositional tendencies. It is evident upon a comparison of the pericope with the rest of John’s Gospel that obvious differences are observed with the *pericope adulterae*. Bart Ehrman has commented that the writing style of the passage is markedly different from the rest of the Gospel and a large number of words and phrases uncharacteristic of the Gospel appear in it.¹⁷ Distinguishable traits within the pericope, to point out a few specific examples worthy of deliberation, are: the use of the conjunction δέ frequently in place of the more common Johannine οὐν; πορεύομαι εἰς (v. 53) appears where John typically uses πρὸς (14:12, 28; 16:28), however εἰς is used in 7:35;¹⁸ and the not so subtle 15 *hapax legomena* (only occurrence) words not found elsewhere in Gospel,¹⁹ to list a few noticeable differences.

While the internal evidence is not a conclusive means for determining authenticity, it simply substantiates further the questionable external evidence of the passage’s authenticity. The external evidence

¹⁷ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 65.

¹⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 883 n. 3.

¹⁹ ἐλαιῶν (8:1); ὄρθρου (v. 2); γραμματεῖς (v. 3); μοιχεία (v. 3); αὐτοφώρῳ (v. 4, also NT hapax legomenon); μοιχευομένη (v. 4); κύψας (v. 6); κατέγραφεν (v. 6, also NT hapax legomenon); ἐπέμενον (v.7); ἀνέκυσεν (vv. 7, 10); ἀναμάρτητος (v. 7, also NT hapax legomenon); κατακύψας (v. 8, also NT hapax legomenon); πρεσβυτέρων (v. 9) κατελείφθη (v. 9); and κατέκρινεν (v. 10). Keith, “Recent and Previous Research on the Pericope Adulterae (John 7.53-8.11),” 380.

alone is strong grounds for suspecting the passage is non-original, but having discrete internal marks on non-originality add considerable weight to the notion that the passage was not native to the original writing of the Gospel record.

IV. HISTORICITY

Origins of the passage may have come from an oral tradition that circulated in the early church regarding a true historical event. Eusebius mentions that in Papias' writings there is a reference to an account of "a woman who was accused before the Lord of many sins, which is contained in the gospel according to the Hebrews."²⁰ However, the woman in the *pericope adulterae* is accused of only one sin, not many. It is possible that Papias is alluding to the same event, but since the text of the gospel according to the Hebrews remains unknown, it is difficult to verify any precise correlation. Ehrman postulates from early Christian writers that there were probably at least three versions of the adulteress story extant in written form as early as the fourth century.²¹

The scribe of Codex Bezae (the first Greek witness to include the pericope) had a proclivity to include additional material into the biblical text (e.g., Acts is one tenth larger than the Alexandrian text) and therefore likely inserted the story perhaps because it demonstrates Jesus upholding the law and yet showing grace that enhances the following incident in the Gospel of Jesus' resistance to pass judgment (see 8:15-19).²²

Having such an early versions floating around about a similar event suggests that the passage might have originated from a favored story that had been pasted around the church describing one of the notable acts of Jesus not recorded in any Gospel account. Moreover,

²⁰ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.17.

²¹ Bart D. Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," *NTS* 34 (1988): 24-44.

²² Comfort, *Text and Translation*, 286.

variations of the story existing in the East and the West indicate that the story is likely a conflation from two sources (oral or written) containing separate details of the story. But, regardless, it is likely that the story has historical credibility, just not canonical.²³

V. WHY IS IT STILL IN THE BIBLE?

Despite the staggering evidence against the authenticity of the *pericope adulterae* it appears in most modern Bible translations (ones that are based on the best manuscripts from recent discoveries and the most thorough textual studies). The problem is that biblical scholarship has to work against the grain of tradition. This corresponds then to the reality that what average person in their right mind wants to buy a Bible that is missing verses that they think should be in the Bible. To the uninformed Christian, that Bible is not THE Bible! It is a partial Bible. Emotional attachment and commonplace in John's Gospel have earned the *pericope adulterae* a beloved residence in the heart of most Christians. Thus, in order to publish an ecumenical Bible, publishers realize that they need to satisfy as wide an audience as possible (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, etc.), many of which deem the passage to be canonical and therefore will not purchase a Bible omitting it.²⁴

The problem is that the manuscripts used in early English Bibles were late manuscripts containing numerous additions and errors that are not in the earliest and best manuscripts that have been discovered. It can be demonstrated through textual studies that New

²³ For a fuller explanation on the historicity of the passage, see Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 24-44.

²⁴ This is only one motivation for why there is reservation about removing it from the text of the New Testament. For a more academic study on the literary contribution and advocating for its inclusion in the Gospel see Z. C. Hodges, "Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11): The Text," *BSac* 136 (1979): 318-332; Z. C. Hodges, "The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11): Exposition," *BSac* 137 (1980): 41-53.

Testament manuscripts got increasingly longer and longer the more they were copied. Later manuscripts have approximately 2% more material in them than early texts. So, the fact is not that scholars are trying to reduce the Bible to 98% of the Word of God, but that they do not want to have 102% of the Word of God.²⁵ If later manuscripts were to be relied on for translations, that amounts to an additional two-thousand and some words to the New Testament.

Bible readers seeking to read the best attested version of the Bible that corresponds to the earliest known text that scholars can reconstruct will not hesitate to cross-out the parts of the Bible that were not originally there. As the evidence clearly shows, the *pericope adulterae* (Jn 7:53-8:11) is not part of the original Bible.

Truth is what matters no matter what the cost. Those who love truth will appreciate knowing that this passage is not part of God's inspired Scripture. Let us not fall prey to the old journalistic cliché: "This story is too good to check." But let us continue to learn about and investigate the Sacred Scripture that we have founded our faith upon. We should be thankful for the efforts of scholars who have demonstrated through both external and internal testimony the non-authentic reality of these verses.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

To summarize the general evidence against the *pericope adulterae*: 1) it does not appear in any Greek texts until its sudden emergence in the 5th century, 2) the passage has a discordant writing style that does not coalesce well with the rest of the Gospel, and 3) the indeterminate position of the passage in the corpus by it

²⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, *My Favorite Passage That's Not in the Bible* [Online] (June 24, 2008 2008 [cited March 4 2013]); available from <https://bible.org/article/my-favorite-passage-that's-not-bible>.

being placed at several different positions all have contributed to a unanimous decision by scholars that the pericope is certainly non-original to the New Testament.

While it may not be original to the New Testament text, there is significant evidence that suggests it may, in fact, be historically authentic. But, the potential for historical verity concerning the account does not constitute proper reason for it to be regarded as canonical Scripture. While it may be a record of Jesus that many have come to love (including myself) where he demonstrates tender mercy toward a sinful adulteress, it nonetheless appears to be an extra-biblical record that was inserted into the Johannine Gospel at a later date. Therefore, we must regard it as not original to the Gospel.

VII. REFERENCES

- Ambrose*. Translated by M. M. Beyenka. The Fathers of the Church. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1954.
- Bridges, Carl B. "The Canonical Status of the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53-8:11)." *Stone-Cambell Journal* 11 (2008): 213-21.
- Comfort, Philip W. *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary*. Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2008.
- Ehrman, Bart D. "Jesus and the Adulteress." *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 24-44.
- _____. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.
- Eusebius*. Translated by K. Lake. 2 vols. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926.
- Hodges, Z. C. "The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11): Exposition." 137 (1980): 41-53.
- _____. "Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11): The Text." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (1979): 318-32.
- Jerome*. Translated by J. N. Hritzu. The Fathers of the Church. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1965.

Keith, Chris. "The Initial Location of the Pericope Adulterae in Fourfold Tradition." *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009): 209-31.

_____. *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

_____. "Recent and Previous Research on the Pericope Adulterae (John 7.53-8.11)." *Currents in Biblical Research* 6 (2008): 377-404.

Metzger, Bruce M. *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1975.

Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971.

Wallace, Daniel B. *My Favorite Passage That's Not in the Bible* [Online]. June 24, 2008 2008 [cited March 4 2013]. Available from <https://bible.org/article/my-favorite-passage-that-s-not-bible>.

Westcott, Brooke F. and Fenton J. A. Hort. "Notes on Selected Readings." in *The New Testament in the Original Greek*. Edited by Cambridge and London: Macmillan, 1882.

CORRESPONDENCE

Author:	Jeremiah Wierwille
Affiliation:	N/A
Street:	06573 Southland Rd.
City/State:	New Knoxville, OH 45871
Country:	U.S.A.
Email:	contact@jerrywierwille.com

CHRISTIAN ARTWORK DEPICTING THE *PERICOPE ADULTERAE*



"Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery" (1565) by Pieter the Elder Bruegel, Courtald Institute Galleries, London.



"Christ and the Adulteress" (1585) by Titian, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



"Christ and the Adulteress" (c. 1550-1575) by Antoine Caron, Museum of Fine Art, Nantes.



"Christ and the Adulteress" (c. 1550-1599) by Andrea Vicentino, private collection, unknown.



“Christ and the Adulterous Woman” (c. 1551-1559) anonymous from Venice purchased by Musée des Beaux-Arts de Strasbourg in 1890 AD.



“Jesus Christ and the Adulteress” (1525) by Rocco Marconi, Accademia Galleries, Venice.



“Christ and the Adulteress” (c. 1525-1528) by Palma Vecchio, Capitoline Museums, Rome.



“Jesus Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery” (c. 1527-1529) by Lorenzo Lotto, Louvre Museum, Paris.



“Jesus Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery” (1532) by Lucas Cranach the Elder, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.



“Jesus and the Adulteress” (1585) by Paolo Veronese, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



"Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery" (1621) by Guercino, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.