

Does the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53–8:11) Have Canonical Authority? An Interconfessional Approach

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The historicity of the event that the pericope adulterae (John 7:53–8:11) relates has not been disproved. The orthodoxy of the words of Jesus it contains also cannot be denied. If the canonicity of the pericope is determined according to the same historical and content-related criteria that the ancient church applied during the development of the canon of Scriptures, then nothing speaks against its canonical status. This sort of assessment does not rest on an infallible and therefore binding decision of the church or its magisterium or on an internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. When the pericope adulterae is accepted into the NT, it should not be placed between chaps. 7 and 8 of the Gospel of John because it is not part of the original text of this book. Rather, it should be put after John's Gospel, because it probably comes from the same historical root. Those who hesitate to accept the pericope adulterae as canonical can remove it from the NT without having to fear a serious loss. Everything the pericope has to say is also expressed several times in other places of the biblical canon. The additional benefit of the narrative of Jesus and the adulteress is not some singular ethical or theological statement. Its particular value lies in the fact that the pericope presents the forgiveness offered by Jesus to those who are condemned to death by the Mosaic law in a more elaborate, more colorful, and more pointed way than any other passage of the NT.

Key Words: canon criteria, Gospel of John, ecclesial infallibility, New Testament canon, pericope adulterae, testimonium spiritus sancti internum

The pericope adulterae (PA) probably should be regarded as a secondary addition to the Gospel of John.¹ It may be the case that its Greek style does not deviate as clearly from the rest of the Gospel as Robert Morgenthaler

1. The pericope's textual originality has been defended by, among others, J. W. Burgon, *The Cause of the Corruption of the Traditional Text of the Holy Gospel* (Cambridge: Deighton, 1896) 249–79; Z. C. Hodges, "The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11): The Text," *BibSac* 136 (1979) 318–32; P. H. R. van Houwelingen, *Johannes: Het evangelie van het Woord* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1997) 421–30.



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Offprint from:
Bulletin for Biblical Research 24.2
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Objections to the Historical-Theological Approach

One of the main objections against the historical-theological approach and against a historical and a theological testing of the PA's canonicity is that it presupposes an open canon and therefore deprives the church of the normative basis for its theological judgments.⁶¹

In response, we should not forget that in the first four to six Christian centuries, the local churches of different places and areas regarded different collections of Scriptures as canonical. In Alexandria, Hebrews was regarded as inspired and normative very early on, while in the West it was not accepted as canonical before the fourth century. On the other hand, fathers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen counted the *Epistle of Barnabas* among the Holy Scriptures. Likewise, in some areas of the church the Shepherd of Hermas received canonical recognition during the third and fourth centuries. This uncertain fringe of the Bible notwithstanding, the church of the early centuries was able, on the basis of this nonuniform scriptural basis, to develop sound answers to far-reaching questions about the Trinity and Christology.

In the light of this experience, modern Christians should be in a position to do theology on a sufficiently solid scriptural basis, even if the canonicity of the PA cannot be settled by an infallible judgment of the Church or by an internal testimony of the Holy Spirit—and all the more if, as we have seen, the PA does not contain anything that goes against or beyond other tenets of the NT. The NT is so redundant that a church without the PA would not be much worse off than a church that has the PA in its biblical canon.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. Whether the PA originated in the Johannine school in Asia Minor or not, the *historicity* of the event it relates has not been disproved. It is by all means plausible that the incident that the PA narrates is just as authentic as the words and deeds of Jesus that are in the original Gospel of John.

2. Measured against the Johannine discourses, the words of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, and the content of the NT letters, the *orthodoxy* of the PA also cannot be denied. All the statements of Jesus made in the PA have close parallels in the remaining NT.

3. If the canonicity of the PA is determined according to the same historical and content-related criteria that the ancient church applied during the development of the canon of Scriptures, nothing speaks against the canonicity of the PA. If the behavior described in the PA can with sufficient probability be traced back to Jesus himself, there is no reason for denying this pericope a normative role for our Christian thinking and acting. In this

61. Thus A. Ziegenaus, "Die Kanonbildung als Grundlage theologischer Schriftinterpretation," in *Veritatis Catholicae* (ed. A. Ziegenaus et al.; Aschaffenburg: Pattloch, 1985) 203–25, namely, p. 211.

case, the story of Jesus and the adulteress comes also into consideration for preaching and as a proof text in theological discussions. This assessment does not rest on an infallible and therefore binding decision of the church or its magisterium. But a Lutheran approach can lead to the same result, albeit by means of different criteria.

4. When the PA is accepted as canonical and into the NT, it should carry a footnote that mentions the text-critical and canon-critical peculiarities of this pericope. It should not be placed between chaps. 7 and 8 of the Gospel of John because it is not part of the original text of this book. Rather, it should be put after John's Gospel, because it probably comes from the same historical root. Also, to those who do not see a close connection between the PA's and the Fourth Gospel's origins, the end of the Gospel of John might appear to be the most adequate place. It is also the end of the four-Gospel canon, and the PA belongs not to the "Apostolos" but to the "Euangelion."

5. Those who hesitate to accept the PA as canonical can remove it from the NT without having to fear a serious loss. Everything the PA has to say is also expressed several times in other parts of the biblical canon. The additional benefit of the PA is not some singular ethical or theological statement. Its particular value lies in the fact that the PA presents the forgiveness offered by Jesus to those who are condemned to death by the Mosaic law in a more elaborate, more colorful, and more pointed way than any other passage of the NT.