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CHUCK A. LOUVIERE

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The Pericope de Adultera

also called

The Woman Taken in Adultery

One of the most disputed passages in John and the New Testament is the account of the woman taken in adultery. A person gives little attention to the study of difficult New Testament passages without considering John 7:53-8:11. Truly, it is one of the most discussed passages in the area of Textual Criticism as this paper will reveal. This writing will cover questions dealing with authenticity of John, the text itself, the theology of the passage and its place in scripture. There will be evidence given for and against the various issues involved in this portion of the Gospel of John. Some call it a fragment from an unknown work¹ and others say it may contain a genuine Johannine stylistic trait.² The diversity of information found on this issue adds to the interest surrounding the passage in question. The tradition of this passage and its debate go back many centuries and will not find rest among the scholars here in a small seminary paper. However, the information covered herein will cause one to ponder the issue and the author believes he resides in a minority concerning his scholastic endeavors of this passage. Nevertheless, the study of God's Word is a pursuit that ultimately will excite and challenge every believer.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE INCIDENT

One of the first questions covered will concern the issue of the authority of the incident. Scholars typically approach this passage based on the evidence within the realm of textual criticism first. It is beneficial, though, to consider whether or not this incident actually occurred. There appears to be sufficient, though not harmonious, evidence to support the historicity of the encounter found within the text of the Bible. This external evidence presents some strong considerations for the student. The first consideration is the account of Papias (2nd cent., Hierapolis, Asia Minor). Among his stories was one "concerning a woman accused of many sins before the Lord" which was cited by Eusebius (E.H. 3.39).³ The account does not identify the woman as an adulteress. However, Origen observed that the story is contained in the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* though he did not identify it as the source.⁴ The possibility exists that one may represent an oral source and the other a written.

A second consideration comes from the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (3rd cent., Syria). This is a writing in which the author cites the manner in which Jesus dealt "with her who had sinned, whom the elders placed before him, leaving the judgment in his hands..." (8.2.24).⁵ The background to this writing is that the author is giving some in-service counseling to bishops on how to bring a repentant sinner back into fellowship with the Church.⁶ In considering the story one can see the relation of mercy. Apparently, the bishops of the time were excessively strict in the handling of the sin of adultery.

A third consideration comes from *Didymus the Blind* (4th cent., Alexandria). Didymus makes reference to certain Gospels where he found the story of a woman

"condemned by the Jews for a sin" who was sentenced to be stoned, but she is saved by the intervention of "the saviour."⁷ This evidence indicates that some version or versions of the pericope (or extract) were in circulation in the churches. Though the accounts are not exactly the same in their details of the story, there may be some difference due to interpretive methods of teaching.

In reading the story a person may find some internal evidence to ponder. There could be an entrapment narrative structure of the text. Obviously the story itself is presented that way. There is no trial, no witnesses, and no one to represent the woman. The accusers took advantage of the situation to try to embarrass Jesus perhaps to justify the statement made in verse 52 concerning "no prophet." Regardless of whether there is a connection to the preceding verses, the narrative has a unity.⁸ The passage at hand begins with the woman and ends with the woman.

Most scholars recognize some kind of historical significance to the passage. It meets the criteria of historical authenticity.⁹ One writer says that "we can feel that that story is true to the character of Jesus... throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic."¹⁰ The passage may be accepted as historical truth.¹¹ Another writer calls it an "oral tradition."¹² So, many people come to the conclusion that the story probably happened and is authentic.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE TEXT

It is at this point that the harmony among scholars takes a turn. The very same scholars may also say that the story "was probably not a part of the original text... and can hardly have belonged to the original text of this Gospel".¹³ Leon Morris says that

"the textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the Gospel."¹⁴ Philip Comfort says that "its presence in the text misrepresents the testimony of the earliest MSS, especially the papyri."¹⁵ Alan Johnson best sums it up:

"...this textual problem has been settled in days past in the minds of most New Testament scholars who, while retaining the authenticity of the incident, exclude the account as an integral part of the Gospel of John."¹⁶

The main point under consideration when these scholars make such strong statements comes from the textual evidence of the passage in question. Many scholars call this process "Textual Criticism." The function and purpose of Textual Criticism is of a dual nature: (1) To reconstruct the original wording of the Biblical text: and (2) to establish the history of the transmission of the text through the centuries."¹⁷ Obviously, the first of these two goals is something that is not possible. The autographs (or original writings) of the Biblical text cannot be reconstructed because they do not exist. Thus, it is in fact hypothetical and unattainable.¹⁸ So, the second goal by nature of the situation becomes the main emphasis in Textual Criticism. Scholars are in disagreement concerning the historical lineage of the Biblical text. There almost seems to be a clear split in theories about this quest for the text of the Bible. Most of the controversy surrounds the New Testament text. One theory leaning into the older manuscripts being more authoritative as one author puts it is "oldes is bestus."¹⁹ Another theory leans more into the total number of existing manuscripts being more authoritative. This paper should prove to be enlightening concerning this controversy.

As far as the text at hand goes, some call it "an insertion."²⁰ One commentary provides the following in the introductory material of the Gospel of John:

(i) It is omitted from the earliest copies of the Greek NT. (ii) In the East it is not found in the oldest form of the Syriac version, the Sahidic and sub-Achimimic, the oldest Bohairic MSS, some Armenian MSS, and the older Georgian version. In the west it is not in some Old Latin MSS and not in the Gothic version... (vi) Many of the MSS which have the passage have asterisks or obeli, showing that the scribes knew the uncertainty of its status. (vii) There is an extraordinary number of variant readings in the passage. (viii) While most of the Greek MSS that include it set it in its present position, in the Ferrar group of cursives it follows Luke 21:38, 225 it comes after 7:36, in the Sinai Georgian MS 16 it follows 7:44, and a number of MSS, including the Armenian, set it after 21:25...²¹

There is no question that textual evidence must be considered in this process of searching for the original wording of the Biblical text. There is an assumption, however, which takes the "older is better" view to determine the more authentic readings. Doubts have plagued the authenticity of the passage from the fourth and fifth centuries in the Eastern Church, both on external and internal grounds.²² The external evidence is very impressive. Hubbard says that "our most reliable and important external witnesses (p66 p75 Aleph B) are completely silent about the text until the seventh or eight century."²³ One naturally may wonder how it arrived into the text then with all of this external evidence. Others question whether it should be thrown out of the New Testament and dismissed. One author explains it as "a unit of oral tradition that circulated in the early Church but was never included in any of the Gospels."²⁴ This evidence implies that the passage was added later for some reason to preserve the authentic story.

In searching for commentary on this passage the reader may find this passage separated from the Gospel text in an appendix or at the end of that section or perhaps not included at all. Bultman says that it does not belong "in the Fourth Gospel in its original form, nor to the ecclesiastical redaction, and it is therefore omitted here."²⁵ In the

Hermeneia Critical and Historical Commentary the following is found: "The author did not consider the pericope of the woman taken in adultery to be an original part of the Fourth Gospel"²⁶ with no commentary other than manuscript evidence. Some modern versions of the Bible will have footnotes that give a similar impression concerning the text. "John 7:53-8:11 is not found in most of the old mss."²⁷ and "The earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11"²⁸ represent some of these comments. Again, this assumption appears. The "older" and "ancient" manuscripts are the "best," and "most reliable." This is definitely one camp that the majority of modern scholars occupy. The student will have no problem finding information against the passage in textual criticism. However, the best manuscripts in a majority opinion do not necessarily constitute the sum of the evidence for Textual Criticism.

The reader has more evidence to consider in fairly considering this issue. The scale can tip the other way with some invested time and research. Zane Hodges presents an impressive charge:

It is one of the chief fallacies of modern textual criticism that the surviving Greek manuscript evidence is sometimes treated as if it were truly representative of what did - or did not - exist among the nonsurviving texts which have long since perished. But this is as unscientific as it could possibly be. In the case being considered, P66 and P75 *alone* represent the third century and both are of Egyptian provenance. Furthermore, the only two witnesses from the fourth century (the famous vellum manuscripts **Ⲛ** and B) are also of Egyptian origin. Thus, for two hundred years - between A. D. 200 and 400 - the data consists of four texts, all Egyptian. That this could represent, by any stretch of the imagination, an adequate "random sample" for the era in question, would be a farfetched and untenable proposition.²⁹

In his evaluation, one can see an impressive rebuttal. Perhaps the older manuscripts are closer to the original historically; however, the originals were circulated in a location distant from Egypt. Egypt has a dry climate that contributes to the preservation of the evidence. Is this evidence for or against the text? Textual Criticism must consider the history of the text throughout time. In looking at the different theories of the history of the New Testament Text, there is a classic division between the documentary witnesses.³⁰ Some manuscripts have the pericope and some do not. What is very interesting is that the evidence leans into the realm of those having the account and those not having the account having more in common than just the pericope. A very large majority of the surviving Greek manuscripts of John's Gospel contain the story precisely where it has been traditionally found in the English Bible - namely after John 7:52.³¹ Some would attempt to build a case that the passage is "likely to have always been found in a majority of the extant Greek texts of every period stretching back to the date of the autograph itself."³² The passage at hand definitely raises many questions. It is peculiarly vulnerable to interpretation.³³ Whereas some of the evidence considered implies that the passage was added in at a later date from the original autograph, other evidence may imply that the text was omitted. One author writes that the story was "deliberately omitted from a very ancient manuscript copy of the Fourth Gospel and that this manuscript's descendants have had a very discernible impact on some of the early New Testament translations, as well as on the early Greek fathers of the Christian church."³⁴ Current manuscript evidence falls mainly into two groups or families. The Byzantine or Majority Texts and the Alexandrian or Critical Texts. The Critical Text is a conjectural reconstruction of a document, a hypothetical text based on the "two best MSS available"³⁵

The phrase “best” appears again probably implying the Vaticanus mss (B) and the Alexandrian mss (Ⲁ). The most widely used Critical Texts are Tischendorf (1869); Westcott and Hort (1881); Nestle-Aland (1898; 1963); and The Greek NT (1966, 1968)³⁶ These texts supposedly represent the older texts. What does this have to do with John? As stated earlier, the older texts do not contain this adulterous pericope. This infers that the account is not original, an addition to the currently known older texts. In preparing this paper, the author found some fascinating evidence concerning a man named John Burgon. What does he have to do with Textual Criticism one may ask? He was an outstanding scholar and textual critic who became known for his work in the realm of New Testament Textual Criticism. "John William Burgon (1813-1888) was willing to spend an entire 13-hour day to establish the authenticity of a single letter of the New Testament Text."³⁷ Notice that he was a contemporary of Tischendorf, Westcott and Hort. Burgon's fundamental thought was that the Textual Criticism of the Scriptures must be according to the analogy of faith, and because of this it must be different from the textual criticism of any other book.³⁸ At first, this may not seem important in discerning the text of the New Testament. However, he was diametrically opposed to the other nineteenth century critics, "notably Westcott and Hort," who stated plainly that textual criticism of the bible should be handled in the same way as with any other book.³⁹ Again, this may not seem important to finding the authoritative text of the Bible, but the approach one takes to the handling of God's Word should supply some evidence to the cause. Westcott and Hort refused his challenges probably calling him a madman. Burgon believed that just as God gradually settled the Canon of the New Testament by weaning His churches from non-canonical books, so He did with the Text also.⁴⁰ The key thing

about this man is that he attacked the current view of the time concerning the older texts. He noticed through his studies that there were many differences between the older texts and the traditional texts. In his opinion, the Text of the New Testament had corruption accounting for the different readings. He said that:

...Codex B differs from the commonly received Text of Scripture in the Gospels alone in 7578 places, of which no less than 2877 are instances of omission. In fact omissions constitute by far the larger number of what are commonly called *Various Readings*. How then can those be called "various readings" which are not readings at all?⁴¹

Burgon is not alone in his observation of the differences in manuscripts. Wilbur N. Pickering in his book The Identity of the New Testament Text says:

As to B and Aleph, we have already noted... that these two MSS disagree over 3,000 times in the space of the four Gospels. Simple arithmetic imposes the conclusion that one or the other must be wrong 3,000 times - that is, they have 3,000 mistakes between them. (If you were to write out the four Gospels by hand do you suppose you could manage to make 3,000 mistakes, or 1,500?) Aleph and B disagree, on the average, in almost every verse of the Gospels. Such a showing seriously undermines their credibility.⁴²

This point is rarely considered or presented by the "oldes is bestus" crowd. What significance does it have? Not only do the older manuscripts disagree with the majority of the manuscripts, they disagree within themselves. The number of times they are not in harmony is a significant number that questions their authority in determining the history of the New Testament text. Pickering goes on to say that the evidence indicates that the earliest MSS are the worst. Clearly the Church did not propagate the sort of text found in the earliest MSS, which demonstrates that they were not held in high esteem in their day.⁴³ After all the older texts are from Egypt which had very little activity from the New

Testament Church. This geographical consideration is most interesting. The majority of the manuscripts in existence have a history that leads back to the area of the church and its beginnings. The older manuscripts have a history that traces back to Egypt. Egypt nowhere in Scripture is viewed as anything but pagan. Burgon's respect for the providence of God's Word seems to have some validity along with other evidence considered thus far concerning the harmony of the manuscript evidence.

There is no sure evidence which says that the older is better or the majority is better. One must not forget this point. There is a good challenge to this issue. Why are there no early Byzantine MSS? Evidence by silence may be no evidence at all. Others would say that the silent testimony has strength. The following statement bears merit:

Why should there be? To demand that a MS survive for 1,500 years is in effect to require both that it have remained unused and that it have been stored in Egypt (or Qumran). Even an unused MS would require an arid climate to last so long. But is either requirement reasonable? Unless there were persons so rich as to be able to proliferate copies of the Scriptures for their health or amusement, copies would be made on demand, in order to be *used*. As the use of Greek died out in Egypt the demand for Greek Scriptures would die out too, so we should not expect to find many Greek MSS in Egypt.⁴⁴

There will be more said about this issue of circulation later. For now, the comment about Egypt is valid. The majority of the manuscripts in existence are not from Egypt. One commentary says that the passage "does not appear in the most ancient mss. Of John, but is found in over 900 Greek mss. (the vast majority). There is some question as to whether these verses form a part of the original text. We believe that it is proper to accept them as part of the inspired text. All that they teach is in perfect agreement with the rest of the bible..."⁴⁵ The harmony principle is very important in seeking of the evidence for the

text. Whenever a large body of ancient documents are seen to be in agreement, this inexplicable harmony becomes their greatest evidence for legitimacy.⁴⁶

There is a degree of importance ascribed to the age of textual evidence. Hodges explains:

The manuscript tradition of an ancient book will, under any but the most exceptional conditions, multiply in a reasonably regular fashion with the result that the copies nearest the autograph will normally have the largest number of descendants. The further removed in the history of transmission a text becomes from its source the less time it has to leave behind a large family of offspring. Hence, in a large tradition where a pronounced unity is observed between, let us say, eighty percent of the evidence, a very strong presumption is raised that this numerical preponderance is due to direct derivation from the very oldest sources. In the absence of any convincing contrary explanation, this presumption is raised to a very high level of probability indeed.⁴⁷

This gives credit to the abundance of manuscripts that are in harmony even though there are little or no ancient copies to compare to the Egyptian family. Even Hort was forced to concede:

A theoretical presumption indeed remains that a majority of extant documents is more likely to represent a majority of ancestral documents at each stage of transmission than *vice versa*.⁴⁸

This idea poses interesting consideration in the pursuit of the wording of the original language. If the autographs were in existence, there would be very few questions about which is true and which is false. The originals have, however, disappeared! Pickering comments:

This throws a totally different light on the situation that we are confronted with regarding the manuscripts. Why do the surviving ancient manuscripts show another text-type? Because they are the only survivors of their generation, and because their survival is due to the fact that they were of a different kind.⁴⁹

There is another point to consider in the question of early manuscript evidence. One that has profound implications. As mentioned earlier, the older manuscript approach holds considerable weight. In further answering the question concerning the Byzantine tradition, one author comments:

Is it unreasonable to suppose that once an old MS became tattered and almost illegible in spots the faithful would make an exact copy of it and then destroy it, rather than allowing it to suffer the indignity of literally rotting away? What would such a practice do to our chances of finding an early "Byzantine" MS?⁵⁰

This is a logical explanation to a difficult question. The New Testament church probably only kept legible copies in circulation. Of course, this is an assumption concerning the circulation of copied manuscripts as is the theory of older existing manuscripts being more accurate. There is no sure evidence either way. However, as one writer put it "the import of this datum has not been taken into account enough in the present New Testament textual criticism."⁵¹ There is another implication concerning the idea of circulation. Defenders of the majority approach may reasonably hold a view about manuscript evidence of the New Testament given the information presented thus far. As mentioned earlier, the scholars are in disagreement on the evidence. If circulation explains why there are no *early* Byzantine manuscripts, it also can explain why there *are* early Egyptian manuscripts. If the church did have guidance from God to settle the Canon and the text (as Burgon believes) then there is a reason why the Egyptian manuscripts did not circulate. Many would say that the Egyptian manuscripts represent the altered texts and were thus not recognized by the church and accordingly withdrawn

form circulation, if indeed they actually ever really circulated. That would mean that textual corruption of the New Testament text would have happened very early in the life of the church. As one author put it "it is no less true to fact than paradoxical in sound, that the worst corruptions to which the New Testament has ever been subjected, originated within a hundred years after it was composed..."⁵² It is possible, according to this view, that the text is a victim of local considerations. One writer refers to a gospel harmonist: "A harmonist might wonder where the woman in adultery verses fit into the chronology of the four Gospels... He could easily excise them, or move them to some other location, as has happened in a few Greek witnesses."⁵³ There are many possibilities in answering why the text is there or is not there in manuscripts. In modern scholarship, many hold to the older texts view. Farstad says: "Let it be emphasized again that the *earliest* Greek copies of John - those from Egypt - do indeed lack this text, but their superior reliability is only a theory."⁵⁴ The textual evidence seems to be against the older copies when one considers much of the evidence. Concerning the four oldest manuscripts and some scholarship, Burgon says:

"It matters nothing that all four are discovered on careful scrutiny to differ essentially, not only from ninety-nine out of a hundred of the whole body of extant MSS. Besides, but even *from one another*. This last circumstance, obviously fatal to their corporate pretensions, is unaccountably overlooked."⁵⁵

One only need look into some of the various writings on this passage to find the heat of the debate. There are people on both sides of the textual debate with strong comments. One author comments: "We venture to assure him, without a particle of hesitation, that a B D are *three of the most scandalously corrupt copies extant*: - exhibit *the most*

shamefully mutilated texts which are anywhere to be met with..."⁵⁶ The textual evidence when considered with the idea of circulation lends interesting thought for the best manuscripts. Textual Criticism deals with the history of the text in question. Why is the text in question? Should the reader consider it? This will now be the subject for consideration.

Contextual Criticism contemplates the harmony of the passage in question in relation to the surrounding text. After reading the passage, some conclude that "the style and vocabulary of this passage differ from the rest of the Gospel, and the passage interrupts the sequence from 7:52-8:12."⁵⁷ This probably leads to the question: "why is the passage placed here?" The harmony principle of context has proponents of opposing views. Many scholars claim that the passage does not fit with the context of the surrounding verses. To consider this point, one must look at the passage itself. As mentioned earlier, most scholars feel that the passage represents an authentic historical account. This is probably the limit of harmony in that realm concerning this passage. The setting of John 7 is at the Feast of Tabernacles.⁵⁸ As far as the narrative flow of the text Westcott and Hort indicate:

During this feast, the Jews would customarily pour water over a rock (in commemoration of the water supply coming from the smitten rock in the wilderness) and light lamps (in commemoration of the pillar of light that accompanied the Israelites in their wilderness journey). With reference to these two ritualistic enactments, Jesus presented himself as the true source of living water (John 7:37-39) and as the true light to be followed (John 8:12)... the pericope of the adulteress disrupts the continuity between the events.⁵⁹

This view would also point out that Jesus made a response in John 8:12 to the Pharisees' bold assertion in John 7:52. Are the verses 7:53 through 8:11 out of context? The passage reads:

- 53 And every man went unto his own house.
1 Jesus went unto the mount of Olives.
2 And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.
3 And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,
4 They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.
5 Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?
6 This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.
7 So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.
8 And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.
9 And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.
10 When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?
11 She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.⁶⁰

Carson points to the textual variants and that John may not have known the material when he wrote the Gospel. He says that "8:12 attaches itself to 7:52."⁶¹ Perhaps the best way for the reader to see this point is to read the two verses together and see if it connects together:

- 52 They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee?
Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.

12 Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.⁶²

Farstad says that the text does not fit together based on the usage of the word them in 8:12. "Every Greek text says 'them,' and if 7:53 were the verse right before it, the 'them' would refer to the meeting of Nicodemus and the Sanhedrin. *But our Lord was not at that meeting.*⁶³ Hodges says that the opening verses (John 7:53-8:2) form the background and the setting and "also fit smoothly into the Johannine context."⁶⁴ O'Day agrees stating that the "introduction establishes the setting for the story as the Temple in Jerusalem."⁶⁵ One commentary says that "this does not fit well with the preceding text because Jesus was not present at the meeting of the Sanhedrin to which the guards had reported."⁶⁶ The context of chapter implies that the setting is the last day of the Jewish feast of Tabernacles (see 7:2, 37) which likely was the eighth day of Leviticus 23:39. Hodges points to the mention of each person going to his "house" stating: "For on the previous seven days observant Jewish worshipers would have lived in 'booths.' But with the feast now over everyone returned home! This delicate point, so sensitive to the festal setting of the preceding material, is an obviously authentic touch."⁶⁷ He also points to the usage of the morning in 8:2 that may connect with Jesus' statement in 8:12. He says: "it can be observed how perfectly it serves as a literary foil for introduction Jesus in His unique role as the spiritual Sun of a darkened world."⁶⁸ It is probable that Jesus would be in the court of the Women. The arrival of Jesus from Olivet would have brought Him into the Temple from the east.⁶⁹ There is a set stage. There was a challenge given concerning the authority of Jesus (7:52) and now Jesus "was to be challenged in His... capacity as a

teaching Rabbi."⁷⁰ The entire affair had the appearance of trickery, a trap specially prepared to catch Jesus.⁷¹

The confrontation covers John 8:3-6a. A woman is brought before Jesus who supposedly was caught in the very act of adultery. Leviticus 20:10 is probably the background to the law in which the scribes and Pharisees referred. This indicated that the woman was to be killed. True, the guilt of the woman was indisputable as the reference to "sin no more" in 8:11 testifies. Here is the dilemma:

If, then Jesus refused to confirm the death penalty, he could be charged with contradicting the law of God and would himself be liable to condemnation. If, on the other hand, he confirmed the verdict of the Pharisees, he would lose his reputation for compassion; and... he could have been reported to the Romans as inciting the Sanhedrin to independent exercise of the death penalty.⁷²

Jesus just bends down and starts to write something on the ground with His finger while they talked. John 7:53-8:11 becomes completely malleable in the hands of interpreters who seek to discover what Jesus wrote on the ground.⁷³ There are many suggestions as to what Jesus wrote. Some suggest that He wrote a list of the sins of those who stood in front of him.⁷⁴ Others suggest that there may be a variety of interpretations because the Hebrew Jesus wrote would be unpointed.⁷⁵ Another author suggests that when Jesus first bent down He wrote the first five commandments and when He bends down the second time he writes the last five commandments.⁷⁶ If the writer of the text wanted the audience to know what Jesus wrote, he probably would have included it in the passage. Perhaps there were some guilty of adultery in the crowd. It is difficult to say. The act of writing is the really important consideration.⁷⁷ Jesus, being in a place to teach those who gathered (8:2), makes an interesting remark. "He that is without sin

among you, let him first cast a stone at her." His reply put the dilemma back on his questioners.⁷⁸ Some say that Jesus implied that they themselves were guilty of adultery or had condoned the deed to trap Jesus which would make them partners in it.⁷⁹ Whatever the case, there were no witnesses brought forth which was necessary to put someone to death (Deuteronomy 17:6). Each one of the accusers would either have to admit that he was guilty or else refrain from demanding the woman's death.⁸⁰ Jesus just wrote on the ground and as He did the accusers left. Obviously Moses did not expect those who stoned an adulteress to be absolutely sinless else no one could enforce the law. What did Jesus reference to sin mean then? It may be a general reference or a specific reference. Either way, the truth did not take long to sink in.⁸¹ Deuteronomy 22:22 and Leviticus 20:10 imply that both the "the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death." What happened to the man? They caught them in the act as the story goes. Did he escape? Did they let him go? Was it someone they knew? Maybe the man was one of them. Whatever the circumstance, they all left.

This superior handling of the crowd placed Jesus in charge as opposed the scribes and Pharisees. He tactfully avoided their trap and then begins to speak to the woman. At this point Jesus asks the woman where here accusers are and if there was any man condemning her. She replies: "no man, Lord." "Jesus did not pronounce sentence either. But neither did He proclaim her to be innocent."⁸² Hodges further comments on the reference to the light:

The sun was rising in the east and its warm rays were rapidly dispelling the shadows from the Court of the Women. Since Jesus had entered the Temple as "deep dawn" (8:2), all of the incidents... could well have transpired in but a few short moments of time... The woman left the Court of the Women by its entrance on the east. In doing so she walked

directly into the blazing Palestinian sun which then lit her path. Out of the shadows of darkness she had been roughly dragged to stand in shame before Jesus and before others. But with His words of compassion and direction still ringing in her ears, a new "day" had truly begun for her and she walked out into it! As she left, Jesus resumed the teaching...⁸³

Does the passage conflict with the surrounding text? Is an insertion to the Gospel of John? If the *pericope de adultera* is an insertion to the text there is another question to consider. "Why was it ever placed in the position which it now occupies? This is the question which Steck (1893) asked long ago, and it has never been answered."⁸⁴ Some scholars say that it conflicts with the flow of the text and others say it compliments the flow of the text. Edward F. Hills comments on Burgon's words in the following consideration:

Look back at what is contained between ch. 7:37 and 52, and note - (q) That two hostile parties crowded the Temple courts (ver. 40-42); (b) That some were for laying violent hands on our LORD (ver. 44); (c) That the Sanhedrin being assembled in debate, were reproaching their servants for not having brought Him prisoner, and disputing one against another (ver. 45-52). How can the Evangelist have proceeded, - 'Again therefore JESUS spake unto them, saying, I am the light of the world'? What is it supposed then that St. John meant when he wrote such words? Surely the Dean's point is well taken. Who can deny that when John 7:53-8:11 is rejected, the want of connection between the seventh and eighth chapters is exceedingly strange? The reader is snatched from the midst of a dispute in the council chamber of the Sanhedrin back to Jesus in the Temple without a single word of explanation. Such impressionistic writing might possibly be looked for in some sophisticated modern book but not in a book of the sacred Scriptures.⁸⁵

This issue of Johannine authorship is a subject covered later in this writing. At this point however, there is a good case to see the passage in question as agreeing with the context. Gail R. O'Day says: "Claims for or against the historicity of the text play no role in resolving the mixed testimony of the manuscript evidence."⁸⁶ This is **Textual Criticism**

which has strong challenges on both sides (older vs. majority). Others question the narrative flow. Allison A. Trites says that the "story of the adulterous woman fits into the controversy-pattern of John chapters 1 to 12"⁸⁷ and that "one finds precisely the same type of controversy language, imagery and terminology which is to be observed in the rest of John 1-12"⁸⁸ and that "there is no overriding *contextual* problem... the story... fits admirably..."⁸⁹ This is **Contextual** Criticism which also has strong challenges on both sides (harmony vs. disruptive). There is the issue of the text being added or omitted. Why would the text be added or omitted? A possible connection to this may be the theological aspect of the story.

Assuming that the story is an actual historical account, what happened to this text for almost 350 years? Why was it added later or omitted earlier? Perhaps **Theological** Criticism took place. During the time period of the early church "sexual sins were especially heinous and without forgiveness."⁹⁰ Gary M. Burge comments:

It is against this background that we find our pericope struggling for recognition. Jesus' refusal to condemn the woman would have stood at odds with the mainstream of Church teaching. How could even a lengthy penance be reconciled to such an immediate act of forgiveness?... It was not until the fourth century that the Church was firmly established in society through the efforts of Constantine. Its care of souls and disciplines had stabilized: Bishops were admonished to demonstrate mercy... In this era our text emerges as a model for the penitent adulteress and is embraced by the leading fathers.⁹¹

The question still arises concerning whether the text represents an addition or omission.

Ivor Powell presents an interesting point in his commentary on John:

Unquestionably, this story presents one of the outstanding features of John's Gospel. Nevertheless, the account is not found in several of the earliest manuscripts. It has been affirmed that the early fathers of the Church deliberately cut this story from the text lest its message should

encourage adultery. They apparently feared that the Saviour's words to the adulterous woman, "Neither do I condemn thee," read out of their context, might condone one of the greatest evils of that day. If the report is accurate, if the early church leaders did in fact do this, they were wrong, for John's gospel could never be quite as wonderful as it is without this tremendous story. Readers are warned that particular attention must be given to every detail for much truth has been enshrined in the first 11 verses of this eighth chapter of John.⁹²

Leon Morris also says that it "is not mentioned very often in the early days,... in a day when the punishment for sexual sin was very severe among the Christians this story was thought to be too easily misinterpreted as countenancing unchastity."⁹³ This is an interesting point to consider. Is there any evidence that such is the case? As mentioned earlier under the Authority of the Incident it is possibly referred to historically. One commentator says:

Augustine tells of the fear of some believers that the story would give their wives encouragement to sin with impunity! This led him to believe that this was the reason for its *removal* from the Gospel.⁹⁴

Hodges also comments on this:

...famous is the observation of Augustine (ca. 430) to the effect that "certain persons of little faith, or rather enemies of the true faith, fearing, I suppose, lest their wives should be given impunity in sinning, removed from their manuscripts the Lord's act of forgiveness toward the adulteress, as if He who had said 'sin no more' had granted permission to sin."... Whatever may be thought of Augustine's assessment of the source of the trouble, there is obviously no question about what he believed to be the authentic text!⁹⁵

This evidence would indicate that the passage suffers from an act of deliberate omission by editors changing the text of the Gospel. This is a good point to consider (local theological pressures) concerning the text at hand in building a case of authenticity. "The

Authority of John” section will cover this more. To consider some of the evidence both for and against this passage, the reader should consider the following summarization chart:

Evidence Against	Evidence For
<p>⋈, (A), B, (C), (L), X, (Δ), 33, 131, 157 omit it.⁹⁶</p>	<p>It is not inconceivable that the ultimate parental source of the... manuscripts in question might have also been the source which originally omitted the passage.¹⁰³ These older manuscripts do not even agree among themselves.</p>
<p>It was found in different places among the various manuscripts even in different Gospel accounts.⁹⁷</p>	<p>The number of texts which place the pericope in some other location in the biblical text than after John 7:52 is minuscule in the extreme.¹⁰⁴</p>
<p>Ancient versions, such as some of the Italic, Egyptian, Old Syriac, Gothic, early manuscripts of the Peschita and Armenian Versions omit it.⁹⁸</p>	<p>The pericope does not seem to have formed a part of the earliest Syriac-speaking church... neither did 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, or Revelation...¹⁰⁵</p>
<p>It was not read by Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and Theophylact, where it might have been expected.⁹⁹</p>	<p>The testimony of ancient writers can be set over against the silence of Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, etc.¹⁰⁶ The passage was admitted as part of the Gospel by Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, and many others.¹⁰⁷</p>
<p>Though found in D (Codex Bezae) this testimony, without confirmation, throws doubt over it, by its adoption of the paragraph.¹⁰⁰ There are several other additions in this mss.</p>	<p>Some of the older manuscripts (Farrar Group) 'the agony and the bloody sweat' from Luke 22:43 is found thrust into Matthew between 26:39 and 40.¹⁰⁸ this is rarely mentioned</p>
<p>The nature of the text differs from that with which it is supposed to be imbedded.¹⁰¹ The passage interrupts the narrative.</p>	<p>Internal evidence in favor is the weakness of the objections. The text can be shown to compliment the continuity of the narrative.¹⁰⁹</p>
<p>With the exception of the Apostolic Constitutions, the Greek writers and commentators are ignorant of it.¹⁰²</p>	<p>What then does the silence of these Fathers really prove? Actually, nothing. Some or all may not have known the passage or may not have found it in the text on which they commented.¹¹⁰</p>
<p>The older manuscripts represent the more authoritative text concerning what is an authentic reading of the New Testament text because it is closer to the original autographs.</p>	<p>When the older manuscripts do not agree there must be a testimony of greater harmony which represents the original reading of the New Testament autographs.</p>
<p>The passage represents a historical account and/or oral tradition which was later added to the text by a scribe or the church. It was not originally part of John's Gospel.</p>	<p>Deliberate act of editorial correction.¹¹¹ The very subject matter would sufficiently account for the occasional omission of the verses.¹¹²</p>

Harmony of Scripture does not constitute justification for its addition.	The story represents the true Character of Christ and does not conflict with the rest of Scripture.
The text does not have evidence of Johannine authorship.	The text has traits which indicate Johannine authorship.
There are many (the majority) scholars and Textual Critics who hold to this view.	
	It leads to a careful examination of the grounds on which our belief in the inspiration of Scripture is based. ¹¹³

There are, of course, other arguments that could appear in this chart. This is a small summary of some of the evidence at hand. The main thrusts of the "Against" side seem to be manuscript evidence and silence of the early Church Fathers. The passage is missing from the older texts. The earliest leaders do not comment on this. Both points argue a point from silence. This point is not a final determining factor in considering the passage, but it is a very strong position to hold. Burgon comments on some of the ancient evidence:

These twelve verses are observed to stand in the same place of S. John in Cod. B c e ff g h j. Jerome (A.D. 385), after a careful survey of older Greek copies, did not hesitate to retain it in the Vulgate. It is freely referred to and commented on by himself in Palestine. And Ambrose at Milan (374) quotes this passage at least nine times. And Augustine in North Africa (396) does so even twice as often. Besides, it is quoted by Pacian in the north of Spain (370); by Faustus the African (400); by Rufinus at Aquileia (400); by Chrysologus at Ravenna (433); by Sedulius a Scot (434). The unknown authors of two famous treatises written at the same period largely quote this portion of the narrative. It is referred to by Victorius or Victorinus (457); by Vigilus of Tapsus (484) in North Africa; by Gelasius, bishop of Rome (492); by Cassiodorus in Southern Italy; by Gregory the Great, and by other Fathers of the Western Church... Jerome, who was familiar with Greek MSS. (and who handled no Greek MSS. Of later date than B and \aleph) expressly relates (380) that 'the *pericope de adultera* is found in many copies both Greek and Latin'...¹¹⁴

It seems that the case for the text has equally some impressive evidence to consider concerning the textual history of the text and the mention of this passage by early historical leaders. This section presented the Authority of the Text with arguments on different sides of the issue. The focus will now turn to the Author.

THE AUTHORITY OF JOHN

There are many fascinating questions raised by this passage found in the Gospel text. Did John actually write it? Many can accept the evidence concerning historical accuracy of the Incident. There are even many who can accept the location of the passage within the text (preferring that it becomes offset or annotated). This section will consider evidence for and against Johannine authorship.

There is a wealth of information against Johannine authorship. Some scholars go as far as saying "the external evidence against the Johannine authorship of the pericope of the adulteress is overwhelming. The internal evidence against Johannine authorship is also impressive."¹¹⁵ The abundance of literature available stresses the importance of the textual evidence in the manuscripts concerning this issue of authorship. Approaching this text without considering the areas of Textual Criticism, Theological Criticism, and Historical Evidence poses an interesting challenge. It also limits the amount of scholarly work to consider in studying the authorship of this passage. Though the other evidence should not be totally disregarded, it should remain in its field and outside the scope of presuppositions as much as possible in dealing with authorship. Does the passage bear evidence of Johannine authority?

As mentioned earlier, Westcott and Hort believe the "pericope of the adulteress disrupts the continuity between the events." In their INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT IN THE ORIGINAL GREEK this statement appears:

The Intrinsic evidence for and against the Section is furnished partly by its own language and contents, partly by its relation to the context. The argument which has always weighed most in its favor in modern times is its own internal character. The story itself has justly seemed to vouch for its own substantial truth, and the words in which it is clothed to harmonize with those of other Gospel narratives. These considerations are however independent of the question of Johannine authorship: they only suggest that the narrative had its origin within the circle of apostolic tradition, and that it received its form from some one in whom the spirit of apostolic tradition still breathed. On the other hand, it presents serious differences from the diction of St. John's Gospel, which, to say the least, strongly suggest diversity of authorship, though their force and extent have sometimes been exaggerated.¹¹⁶

The notes then continue to explain the idea that the text was an insertion from another historical source. True, authorship does closely relate to Contextual Criticism. However, it is dealt with separately herein. Probably the internal evidence of linguistics has evidence of worth to consider. Robert Morgenthaler shows that out of eighty-two vocabulary word employed in 7:53-8:11, fourteen do not occur elsewhere in John's Gospel.¹¹⁷ This point bears merit in pondering the authorship of this passage. Morgenthaler also shows that twenty-six out of seventy-five Johannine preferred words occur in John 4:6-18, where John likewise treats the meeting of a woman with Jesus, whereas only fourteen occur in 7:53-8:11.¹¹⁸ One commentary says: "both the textual evidence and stylistic data in the passage indicate that this is non-Johannine material."¹¹⁹ This conclusion would naturally indicate that the passage is not part of the Scripture. As the same commentary offers: "the consensus of New Testament textual scholars is that

this section was not part of the original text. For Protestants who accept that judgment, this fact settles the issue of canonicity.”¹²⁰ At this point the author of this writing certainly feels like his view places him in a minority of textual students. Alan Johnson comments on the statistical method (linguistics):

Furthermore, Morgenthaler tabulates a number of words and particles that he feels are necessary for Johannine writing and are absent in the *pericope adulterae*. However, over two-thirds of these same words are totally absent as well from 2:13-17... undisputed passage... statistics can discredit a genuine passage in John. The obvious weakness of such a method will be acknowledged and abandoned by serious students who are searching for a true evaluation of the linguistic phenomena of 7:53-8:11... popular word-count statistics... having no value in deciding the genuineness of the *pericope adulterae*, the question is still open as to whether the passage may contain any stylistic trait or literary pattern that would clearly show its affinity with the Gospel of John.¹²¹

Johnson continues in his article to compare wording from various passages in the Gospel. His studies show that John 2:13-17 according to this linguistic approach of style fares considerably worse in percentages than 7:53-8:11, yet is not mentioned. Hodges mentions some evidence along this line in favor of Johannine authorship:

...the Greek clause τοῦτο δὲ ἔλεγον πειράζωντες αὐτόν (8:6) is a virtual replica of the similar expression in 6:6, τοῦτο δὲ ἔλεγεν πειράζων αὐτόν. It is rather disheartening to observe how rarely writers who reject the Johannine authenticity of the narrative refer to this striking feature. Of course, it is easier to pass it by in silence since the presence of so clear a mark of John's style poses severe problems for those who feel the narrative is no part of the Johannine Gospel.¹²²

It appears that the same information can support the text or discount it depending upon which evidence is presented. Hodges in another article says that "an excellent case can be

made that the narrative is not only entirely suitable to its context but also bears the stamp of Johannine authorship.¹²³ Johnson concludes in his research:

No one should feel compelled from statistical tabulations to exclude the *pericope* from the Gospel of John. Furthermore, the distinctive literary trait of the Fourth Gospel that can be seen in John 8:6 must be adequately explained by those who would reject the genuineness of the passage. If internal evidence is highly determinative in our methodology of New Testament textual criticism, perhaps a re-interpretation of the *external* evidence of John 7:53-8:11 is in order.¹²⁴

Evidence against Johannine authorship now may not seem so "overwhelming" after considering the above information. At times it seems that scholars make statements that imply holding a contrary view is to go against clear evidence. Of course, with the evidence as presented comes implications. "If the pericope is an original part of John's Gospel, then its excision was a major act of early textual criticism."¹²⁵ One writer says: "Modern scholars deny that John ever wrote 7:53 to 8:11."¹²⁶ This statement is a little extreme for there are some modern scholars who defend Johannine authorship. Lawrence O. Richards says: "the story fits the flow of John's thought, for it underlines the fact that all have sinned, and that Jesus has not come to condemn but to save."¹²⁷

CONCLUSION

As all of the evidence comes into focus concerning the woman taken in adultery, there are some final thoughts to present. One has to do with God's providence. A lot of scholars are quick to point to the **Inspiration** of the Scriptures, but it seems that few scholars point to the **Preservation** of the Scriptures. Following are some words from John Burgon:

...And how could the true text have been preserved save through the providence of God working through His Church?... First God gave His Church the twenty-seven New Testament books through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and then through the Spirit also He began to lead the Church into a recognition of these books as her canonical New Testament Scripture... Under the leading of the Holy Spirit the Church was guided to receive only the twenty-seven New Testament books as canonical and to reject all others... Just as God guided the Church to reject, after a period of doubt and conflict, all noncanonical writings and to receive only the true canonical New Testament books, so God guided the Church during the same period to reject false readings and to receive into common usage the true New Testament text... If we must believe that the true New Testament text was lost for fifteen hundred years, how can we be certain that it has now been found? What guarantee have we that either B or Aleph contain the true text?¹²⁸

Burgon's statements cause one to ponder the manuscript evidence. The Byzantine text (so called because this was the Greek New Testament in general use throughout the Greater part of the Byzantine Period: 312-1453)¹²⁹ would be an erroneous text containing the pericope while the Egyptian manuscripts had the true reading of the Gospel which was not known until their discovery according to the evidence against the pericope. This is an interesting idea. If that is the preserve text of the New Testament, why do they not have agreement among themselves? Pickering comments:

Aleph and B have over 3,000 mistakes between them, just in the Gospels. Aleph is clearly worse than B, but probably not twice as bad - at least 1,000 of those mistakes are B's. Do Aleph and B fit your notion of a good witness?¹³⁰

This manuscript evidence will, no doubt, continue to present interesting challenges for the schools of thought surrounding the criticism. Hodges says: "whatever else may be said about this famous passage, its appearance or nonappearance after John 7:52 is in no way accidental but is in fact a deliberate act of textual emendation."¹³¹

This idea of textual emendation poses an interesting thought that Hodges also comments. "It is not observed often enough that this kind of warning might well have been evoked by John's own awareness that the New Testament writings - indeed, even his own! - had been willfully tampered with already in his own lifetime."¹³² Hills says "it is surely more reasonable to believe that this story was deleted from John's Gospel by over-zealous disciplinarians than to suppose that a narrative so contrary to the ascetic outlook of the early Christian Church was added to John's Gospel from some extra-canonical source."¹³³ Another interesting comment of Hodges is: "Consequently, the possibility cannot be excluded that by the time of the Book of Revelation was penned (perhaps in the reign of Domitian, A.D. 81-96), the textual disruption caused by the addition or subtraction of the *pericope de adultera* had already occurred!"¹³⁴ Echoing in the background one may here the words of Revelation 22:18-19. This is, of course, speculation, but poses an interesting point. No one know when the emendation took place! Evidence suggests very early in the life of the Church, but no exact date.

It seems that "overwhelming evidence" in this issue is a thing of the past. Many scholars feels so certain that John 7:53-8:11 is not a genuine part of the Gospel of John that they regard any other discussion as unprofitable.¹³⁵ Hopefully research that presents thorough objective results will cause one to think about their view in light of that evidence. In considering the Authority of the Incident, the Authority of the Text, and the Authority of John concerning the *pericope de adultera* one can conclude the following:

1. God has exercised His providence over the Holy Scriptures (see: Psalms 12:67; 68:11; 119:89, 160; 138:2; Isaiah 40:8; 55:11; Matthew 5:18; 24:35; Luke 21:33; 16:17; John 10:35; 12:48; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

2. Regardless of which view one holds on this passage, evidence is clear that a textual emendation has occurred within the Gospel of John.
3. There is no overwhelming evidence that conclusively determines the status of the passage in question. One exercises a degree of faith in the particular evidence in which they wish to cite.
4. Concerning the text, either (a) it was added to the current Gospel from a textual source indicating its validity as a true historical account (which has done no discernible irreconcilable damage to the text) or (b) it was omitted from the text of the Gospel by early leaders fearing the results of the subject matter (and latter added when theological pressures ceased) or, (c) it has always existed in the text somewhere in the life of the Church even though there is a silence of manuscript evidence until later in the history of the Church.

Wherever one may fall in their view on the passage in question, one cannot deny the interest in studying this passage. It represents a point of fascination and debate. One should consider the evidence of Textual Criticism, Contextual Criticism, Theological Criticism, authenticity, and the location of the text in question. This paper reveals that the passage is an outstanding mark of the Gospel of John which portrays an important message of truth and mercy.

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- ¹²⁰ Ibid.
- ¹²¹ Alan F. Johnson, 93-94.
- ¹²² Zane C. Hodges, “The Woman Taken in Adultery: Exposition.” 44.
- ¹²³ Zane C. Hodges, “The Woman Taken in Adultery: The Text.” 318.
- ¹²⁴ Alan F. Johnson, 96.
- ¹²⁵ Zane C. Hodges, “The Woman Taken in Adultery: The Text.” 328.
- ¹²⁶ Kevin R. James, 117.
- ¹²⁷ Lawrence O. Richards, The Victor Bible Background Commentary - New Testament (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1994), 236.
- ¹²⁸ David Otis Fuller, Counterfeit or Genuine? Mark 16? John 8? (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1990), 19-21.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid., 18.
- ¹³⁰ Wilbur N. Pickering, 135.
- ¹³¹ Zane C. Hodges, “The Woman Taken in Adultery: The Text.” 321.
- ¹³² Ibid.
- ¹³³ Edward F. Hills, 153.
- ¹³⁴ Zane C. Hodges, “The Woman Taken in Adultery: The Text.” 321-322.
- ¹³⁵ Edward F. Hills, 154.

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