

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE PERICOPE OF THE ADULTERESS (JOHN 7:53-8:11):  
IS IT AUTHORITATIVE FOR THE CHURCH?

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## **Introduction: the Problem, the Question and the Data to be Examined**

The pericope of the adulteress (hereafter “PA”), traditionally located in John 7:53-8:11, is a much-loved passage of scripture. However, in the last two hundred years or so, textual critics have begun to doubt that it is original to John’s gospel. Today the majority of scholars think it was an early addition to John. Most commentaries and translations dismiss this passage with a brief reference to its exclusion from the earliest and best manuscripts and its internal problems without much elaboration; some relegate it to an appendix; some exclude it altogether without comment. The implication is that the PA is dispensable and without authority for the church.

But is this fair to the facts about the PA and its history? Despite the apparent dismissive consensus of scholars, many articles continue to be published on the question of the PA’s place in John’s Gospel, and few translations or critical Greek texts have removed it. Doubts remain about the doubts; the issue is far from settled—the question remains: is the PA an authoritative text for the Church? That is, does the PA belong in the Bible?

There are several areas that will need to be examined in order to answer this question. First, there is the external manuscript evidence for and against the inclusion of the PA. For our purposes, only manuscripts dated from the middle of the fifth century AD and earlier will be considered. By the fifth century, the canon was essentially closed and things had settled somewhat since the major events and milestones for the church which occurred in the fourth century—for example, the conversion of Constantine, the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, and Athanasius’ Festal Letter of 367, providing his list of the canonical New Testament books. Furthermore, the number of extant manuscripts begins to increase significantly in the fifth century. These later manuscripts are therefore beyond the scope of this study. The evidence of the patristic fathers will also be examined. The citations and manuscript references of the early

church fathers disclose information about the content of manuscripts available to them, as well as give insight into their opinion and use of the PA. Internal textual questions of style and context will also be considered.

The data presented by the external manuscript evidence, patristics, and internal manuscript evidence will be examined in that order. First, this study will look at the external manuscript evidence, determining what it can and cannot say, followed by reflections on the external manuscript evidence. Second, we will examine the patristic evidence. This section will look at relevant scripture citations, commentaries, letters, etc. and will reflect on their bearing on the question of the PA's authority for the church. Third, the internal textual questions of style and context will be considered: is the style of the PA Johannine or does it show evidence of another writer? Does the PA fit the context in its traditional place at John 7:53-8:11? Finally, the cumulative evidence will be considered in relation to excision of the PA from the New Testament or the possibilities for acceptance of the PA as an authoritative text for the Church.

## **External Evidence: The Manuscripts**

### *Greek Manuscripts*

#### **Manuscripts Omitting the PA**

The PA does not appear in extant Gospel manuscripts until the late fourth or early fifth century. The earliest gospel extant manuscripts do not contain this portion of scripture. The papyri P<sup>66</sup>, dating from approximately AD 200, and P<sup>75</sup>, from the early third century, do not include the PA. <sup>1</sup> P<sup>66</sup> is almost a complete manuscript of John. It is missing portions of the text,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all manuscript data comes from Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Greek New Testament* 4<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 2001). (Hereafter "UBS4").

but contains continuous text from John 6:35-14:26, in which the PA is normally located. P<sup>75</sup> contains portions of Luke and John, with continuous text from John 1:1-11:45.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest extant gospel uncials also do not contain the PA. Codices Sinaiticus (Ⲁ) and Vaticanus (B), both dating from the fourth century, do not include it. However, Vaticanus (B) does include a series of dots at John 7:52, suggesting that the scribe of that manuscript had knowledge of the PA in some respect.<sup>3</sup> This could mean either that the scribe knew of the PA from a manuscript other than the one he was copying, or that he excised it from the *vorlage* of B, or perhaps that he was aware of its existence as a tradition. Codex W, from the fourth or fifth century, does not include it either.

Codices Alexandrinus (A) and Ephraemi (C), both from the fifth century, appear not to include the PA, but both are missing substantial portions of John at the point precisely in the middle of which the PA is traditionally located. A is missing John 6:50-8:52 and C is missing 7:3-8:34.<sup>4</sup> The United Bible Societies' *The Greek New Testament* (hereafter "UBS4") notes that exclusion of the PA is the "*most probable* reading of [the] manuscript[s] where the state of [their] preservation makes complete verification impossible."<sup>5</sup> Metzger argues that their inclusion of the PA is unlikely, based on careful measurement of the manuscripts, which indicates there is not room enough in A and C for all of the missing text if it was to include the

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<sup>2</sup> Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, et al eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece 27<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001): 687, 688. (Hereafter "NA27".)

<sup>3</sup> Chris Keith, "Recent and Previous Research on the *Pericope Adulterae*," in *Currents in Biblical Research* 6.3 (June 2008): 378; Jennifer Wright Knust, "Early Christian Re-Writing and the History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14.4 (Winter 2006): 489; Carl B. Bridges, "The Canonical Status of the *Pericope Adulterae*," in *Stone-Campbell Journal* 11. 2 (Fall 2008): 214n4.

<sup>4</sup> NA27, 690.

<sup>5</sup> UBS4, 20\*, 347.

PA.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, McMillan notes that when  $\aleph$ , A, B, and C all omit something, “deep consideration must be given before adding it to a narrative,” since they are universally recognized to be the best uncials.<sup>7</sup> These codices, categorized as Alexandrian texts (though not without other text-types mixed in), were transmitted with much more care than were their “Western” text counterparts.<sup>8</sup> They are therefore considered more reliable than other text forms.  $\aleph$  and B, in particular, are considered the best of the uncials.<sup>9</sup> Various other Greek manuscripts dating from the sixth century into the twelfth also omit the PA.

### **Manuscripts Including the PA**

There are no extant papyri that include the PA. However, it is notable that the Gospel of John has a relatively high representation in the ancient papyri.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the two nearly complete John papyri do not include the PA is not often, if ever, weighed against the fact that there are thirteen other papyri of John dating from the same centuries as P<sup>66</sup> and P<sup>75</sup> or earlier,

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* 2nd ed. (United Bible Societies, 1994), 187; Gary M. Burge, “A Specific Problem in the New Testament Text and Canon: The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11),” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27.2 (June 1984): 142. This assumes not unreasonably that the missing section would have likely included the missing material *around* the PA rather than the PA itself.

<sup>7</sup> Earle McMillan, “Textual Authority for John 7:53-8:11,” in *Restoration Quarterly* 3.1 (1959): 20.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Martin McDonald, “Wherein Lies Authority? A Discussion of Books, Text, and Translations,” in *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 211, 216; Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 66. Metzger and Ehrman note, for instance, that  $\aleph$  has an element of the “Western” text in it as well.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 62-69. McDonald, notes, however, that “If Vaticanus is one of the most important ancient manuscripts, it means there is much we don’t know about the original text” (McDonald, “Wherein Lies Authority?”, 226).

<sup>10</sup> D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 323.

but which are too fragmentary to determine if the PA was or was not included.<sup>11</sup> Arguing from silence is logically problematic—little can be determined about the contents of John in places where the manuscripts are silent—so we should be careful not to draw too many implications from this fact.<sup>12</sup> It is nevertheless important to note that out of the fifteen extant papyri of portions of John only two definitively do not include the PA. Of the rest, scholars are uncertain.

The earliest appearance of the PA in an extant manuscript is in Codex D (Bezae), which UBS4 places in the fifth century. Other scholars date it more specifically at around AD 400.<sup>13</sup> Parker notes, however, that dating manuscripts is an approximate science and that there is a range of 50 years in which a manuscript can conceivably have been copied, which would give a range of 25 years on either end of the approximate date.<sup>14</sup> This means that D could be late fourth century or early fifth century. At any rate, it does not differ in age significantly from  $\aleph$  and B—the “best” uncials—and not at all from A and C, and the reading itself could be significantly older than the manuscript itself.<sup>15</sup>

Codex D is generally understood to be a “Western” text-type, which tends to be free in the transmission of text. Metzger/Ehrman notes that

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>12</sup> Though in some respects scholars are arguing from silence in the case of Codices Alexandrinus (A) and Ephraemi (C), since the portion of the manuscript which would include the PA is missing and only by measurement of the manuscripts have scholars determined with some level of certainty that the PA would not have fit.

<sup>13</sup> Knust, “History of the *Pericope Adulterae*,” 489, 503; Josep Ruis-Camps, “The Pericope of the Adulteress Reconsidered: The Nomadic Misfortunes of a Bold Pericope,” in *New Testament Studies* 53.3 (July 2007): 381.

<sup>14</sup> Parker, *New Testament Manuscripts*, 32. These numbers are based on an approximate scribal career of 50 years. Of course, this statistic also applies to other manuscripts besides D, but since scholarly opinion seems to rest partially on the age of MSS, it is worth mentioning here in relation to D.

<sup>15</sup> Chris Keith, “The Initial Location of the *Pericope Adulterae* in Fourfold Tradition,” in *Novum Testamentum* 51.3 (June 2009): 215. Keith notes, however, that “In the case of the PA’s inclusion...one is dealing with an example where a scribe purposefully did not follow his exemplar.” Keith gives no evidence for this statement, which seems to beg the question. Furthermore, immediately after this he notes the exception of the Vulgate without irony.

No known manuscript has so many and such remarkable variations from what is usually taken to be the normal New Testament text. Codex Bezae's special characteristic is the free addition (and occasional omission) of words, sentences, and even incidents.<sup>16</sup>

The nature of the "Western" text leads some scholars to regard it with suspicion. Burge suggests that the PA first entered the uncials in D, though it is not clear if he means that this is its first appearance in the uncials specifically or in any manuscript.<sup>17</sup> Most scholars agree that D's text must go back to a time well before its creation, and that the PA must have been included in a small number of manuscripts of John "no later than the third century."<sup>18</sup> Burge later notes that the PA makes an appearance in Jerome's Vulgate in 382, suggesting inclusion in manuscripts earlier than D, though none of those manuscripts are extant.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, in an offhand comment Ehrman notes that there is "solid evidence that the PA appeared in Alexandrian texts of John well before its incorporation in the earliest extant [manuscripts]."<sup>20</sup>

The PA appears in no other extant Greek manuscript until the ninth century.<sup>21</sup> In general, however, inclusion of the PA is supported by the majority of all manuscripts, including the Byzantine text-type.<sup>22</sup> Some later manuscripts (eighth century and later) include asterisks and obelisks around the PA, suggesting uncertainty about the passage even when included, or they might be an indication of lectionary use.<sup>23</sup> A few very late manuscripts also place the PA in other

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<sup>16</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Burge, "Specific Problem," 145.

<sup>18</sup> Knust, "History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," 494, 506. See also below.

<sup>19</sup> Burge, "Specific Problem," 148.

<sup>20</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," in *New Testament Studies* 34.1 (January 1988): 26.

<sup>21</sup> According to the critical apparatus of UBS4, 347.

<sup>22</sup> NA27, 273.

<sup>23</sup> Rius-Camps, "Pericope of the Adulteress Reconsidered," 397; Keith, "Initial Location," 227-28.

locations—some elsewhere in John, others in Luke. However, the argument often made by scholars that the PA has no fixed location is inaccurate. Scholars argue that since the PA has no fixed location it cannot be original to the gospels but is a later addition. The New English Bible has removed it from the main body of John and placed it at the end of the book with a footnote stating, “This passage, which in the most widely received editions of the New Testament is printed in the text of John, 7.53-8.11, has no fixed place in our witnesses. Some of them do not contain it at all. Some place it after Luke 21.38, others after John 7.36, or 7.52, or 21.24.” It is true that the PA can be found in locations other than after John 7:52 in some manuscripts, but these are few in number (UBS4 list only four such manuscripts), and there is no extant manuscript evidence that places the PA outside of its standard location after John 7:52 until the late ninth or tenth century.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Versions*

Within the translations, there is disagreement from the beginning. The PA is excluded from one Old Latin MS from the fourth century (*it<sup>a</sup>*); from Syriac manuscripts *syr<sup>c</sup>* (fourth century) and *syr<sup>p</sup>* (first half of fifth century<sup>25</sup>); from Coptic versions *cop<sup>sa</sup>* (fourth century), *cop<sup>pbo</sup>* (fourth/fifth century), and *cop<sup>ach2</sup>* (4<sup>th</sup> century), which have roots in third century manuscripts; as well as Armenian (fifth century) and Georgian (fifth century) versions.<sup>26</sup>

Conversely, Old Latin versions *it<sup>d</sup>*, *it<sup>e</sup>*, and *it<sup>ff2</sup>* (all fifth century) all include the PA. Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, which was a collation of the Old Latin versions available to him,

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<sup>24</sup> Zane C. Hodges, “The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11): The Text,” in *Bibliotheca sacra* 136.544 O-D (1979): 325; Keith, “Initial Location,” 211.

<sup>25</sup> UBS4, 27\*.

<sup>26</sup> UBS4, 347, 27\*-28\*.

included the PA. UBS4 dates the Vulgate to either fourth or fifth century; Keith gives the very specific date of AD 384 for the Vulgate. Other scholars would mark that year as the approximate time Jerome began to put together the Vulgate.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to know what to do with the evidence of the versions. Hodges argues that it proves nothing more than the “antiquity of both the inclusion and the omission of the pericope.”<sup>28</sup> The versions appear, at any rate, to be split between inclusion and exclusion, and possibly Eastern and Western sources.

### *Reflections on the Manuscript Evidence*

The early but limited inclusion of the PA in the manuscript tradition is not enough for most scholars to support its originality to John. The Greek manuscript evidence leads most scholars to state some version of Metzger’s assertion that “the evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the pericope of the adulteress is overwhelming.”<sup>29</sup> However, Keith notes that while a “clear and overwhelming majority” of scholars conclude that it is not original to John, this does not mean that there is scholarly *consensus*.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, most scholars also believe that while the PA is not original to John, it does appear to be an authentic event in the life of Jesus.<sup>31</sup> It is

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<sup>27</sup> UBS4, 27\*; Keith, “Recent and Previous Research,” 383; Keith, “Initial Location,” 213. Parker dates it around 383-4 (*New Testament Manuscripts*, 327).

<sup>28</sup> Hodges, “The Text,” 328.

<sup>29</sup> Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 187. See also, Keith, “Initial Location,” 223; McMillan, “Textual Authority,” 21; Alan F. Johnson, “A Stylistic Trait of the Fourth Gospel in the *Pericope Adulterae*?” in *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 9.2 (Spring 1966): 91; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2007), 281n.112; Philip Comfort, “The Pericope of the Adulteress,” in *Bible Translator* 40.1 (January 1989): 145; Edwyn Clement Hoskyns and Francis Noel Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 563ff; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 882; etc.

<sup>30</sup> Keith, “Recent and Previous Research,” 379.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 394; Hodges, “The Text,” 319ff;

“known to some” by the mid-to-late second century, and would have been found in a small number of manuscripts of John by the third century.<sup>32</sup>

The question then becomes, what is the PA’s origin? A number of scholars have argued for its origin in the evangelists. Hodges, for instance, argues that the church excised the PA from John at a very early date. He notes that there is no other example of a historically reliable passage finding its way into a canonical Gospel and this insertion receiving widespread acceptance. He argues that it might be more plausible that “the narrative suffered deletion from some very early Greek exemplar of John’s gospel, was perpetuated by this exemplar’s many descendants, and that the excision has thus exercised much influence on later copyists, translators, and commentators.”<sup>33</sup> Hodges notes, as do other scholars, that most textual corruption occurred prior to the third century.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, to place the origin of the problem of the PA in the third century or later is problematic, because at that point in the development of the text and the church’s canon it would have had significantly less impact on transmissional history. The fact that the inclusion of a passage of significant length such as the PA’s becomes the norm in later manuscript tradition suggests that the PA must have appeared in (or been excised from) manuscripts prior to the third century, since this kind of major transmissional change could not have occurred later.

Much has been made of the fact that Hodges is a proponent of the Majority/Byzantine text, which might make his opinion on the matter suspect (since the PA is supported by the

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<sup>32</sup> Knust, “History of the *Pericope Adulterae*,” 489, 494. See Patristic evidence below.

<sup>33</sup> Hodges, “The Text,” 320.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*; McDonald, “Wherein Lies Authority?” 216.

Majority Text).<sup>35</sup> However, other scholars have made similar claims about the PA's origins. Rius-Camps, for instance, argues that the PA was located first in Mark's gospel, later to be taken up by Luke, and then excised from both works quite early after their writing.<sup>36</sup> For both Rius-Camps and Hodges, the reason for the PA's early removal could have been the moral strictness of the early church, which would have found the PA too lax and tolerant.<sup>37</sup> While they do not agree as to which gospel the PA is original, they nevertheless agree not only that it is an authentic story, but that it is *original to a canonical gospel*.

Childs goes further: he suggests that while it is possible that the various texts all derive from one original, the earliest manuscripts show wide variety and that the "model of a reservoir of tradition from which various streams flow is far more accurate than that of an ideal autograph at the source."<sup>38</sup> He does not pursue the practical implications of this, but one must wonder, if his suggestion is accurate is it possible that John wrote more than one copy of his gospel, at least one of which included the PA? After all, John wrote that "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book" (John 20:30, NRSV). Perhaps the PA was too important for John not to include. Or perhaps he did include it but removed it from a later copy. This is conjecture, but Childs' idea opens up possibilities not usually considered: that some of

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<sup>35</sup> See Gordon D. Fee, "The Majority Text and the Original Text of the New Testament," in *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 183-208; Kurt Aland, "The Text of the Church?" in *Trinity Journal* 8.2 (Fall 1987): 131-144.

<sup>36</sup> Rius-Camps, "Pericope of the Adulteress Reconsidered," 382ff.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 383; Hodges, "The Text," 330-31.

<sup>38</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 524.

the New Testament documents may have had more than one original—that is, written by the same author—copy.<sup>39</sup>

### Patristic Evidence

The Patristic writings are particularly interesting with respect to the PA. While the extant manuscript evidence up to and including the fifth century seems to favour the omission of the PA in terms of manuscript numbers, the number of Christian writers of that same time period seem to slant towards *inclusion* of the same. The number of manuscripts or citations is certainly not definitive for textual criticism, since a number of factors could contribute to those numbers, but it is nevertheless an interesting turnaround between the sources.<sup>40</sup>

Tatian's second century harmonization of the gospels, the *Diatessaron*, does not include the PA. Origen (second/third century), Tertullian (second/third century), Cyprian (second/third century), Chrysostom (fifth century), and Cyril (fifth century) do not comment on the PA. According to Augustine (fourth/fifth century), *some* manuscripts that he was aware of did not include the PA.<sup>41</sup>

Conversely, Piapas, whose writing dates from the early second century, possibly late first, already made reference to the PA.<sup>42</sup> According to the fourth century historian Eusebius, Piapas “set forth another account about a woman who was falsely accused of many sins before the Lord,

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<sup>39</sup> On this, see below.

<sup>40</sup> Fee, “The Majority Text,” 184-5.

<sup>41</sup> UBS4 for all Patristic dates.

<sup>42</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers* Vol. II, Loen Classical Library (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 86-87.

which is also found in the Gospel according to the Hebrews.”<sup>43</sup> Didymus the blind, a fourth century Alexandrian, also claims to have been aware of manuscripts that included the PA.<sup>44</sup> He discusses what appears to be the PA in his commentary on Ecclesiastes. In it, Jesus intervenes on behalf of a woman about to be stoned for adultery.<sup>45</sup> Ehrman comes to the conclusion that Piapas’ version of the story (which is partial) is authentic, though it is not clear if his version was found in a gospel, whereas Didymus’ version is not, though he claims to have found it in gospel manuscripts.<sup>46</sup>

The apparent reading of the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ca. 380) also includes the PA. Ambrosiaster (fourth century), Ambrose (fourth century), Pacian (fourth century), Rufinus (fourth/fifth century), Jerome (fourth/fifth century), Faustus Milevis (active in the fourth century), and Augustine (fourth/fifth century) all confirm the inclusion of the PA.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Jerome wrote that the PA was included in both Greek and Latin manuscripts he had examined. The weight in terms of age tends towards exclusion of the PA, but the widespread awareness of the PA’s inclusion in fourth and early fifth century bears reflection, particularly as the manuscripts these writers are reading are themselves undoubtedly part of older manuscript traditions.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ehrman, *Apostolic Fathers*, 105. It is not clear if Eusebius meant that Piapas’ source was the Gospel according to the Hebrews or if it means that Eusebius found it in that gospel as well as in Piapas. Ehrman suggests the latter, with Piapas receiving the story from oral tradition.

<sup>44</sup> UBS4, 347.

<sup>45</sup> Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress”, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 35. Ehrman argues that the story as we have it now has been influenced by both accounts. McDonald, by contrast, posits that Ehrman argues from silence, that the authors could have cited portions of a larger, common text, and that neither version appears as they are cited in any extant manuscript (J. Ian H. McDonald, “The So-Called *Pericope De Adultera*,” in *New Testament Studies* 41.3 (July 1995): 419.

<sup>47</sup> UBS4, 32\*-37\*, 347.

<sup>48</sup> Knust, “History of the *Pericope Adulterae*,” 494.

*Reflections on the Patristic Evidence*

It is clear that the patristic evidence presents a problem with respect to the PA. Scholars commonly note that no western Father cites the PA until the twelfth century.<sup>49</sup> Hodges maintains that the silence of the Eastern Fathers regarding the PA has limited value in this discussion. He notes that an eleventh century commentator on John, who would not have been unaware of a story so widely circulated by that time, does not comment on the PA. The silence of the early Fathers on the PA, therefore, does not prove anything.<sup>50</sup> McMillan is more careful, stating that while it is problematic to argue from silence, it is nevertheless notable that there are numerous church fathers that were not aware of the PA.<sup>51</sup> Its absence in the writings of Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Tertullian is particularly notable since they had a concern in their writings specifically for how to deal with cases of adultery.<sup>52</sup> Cyril wrote a commentary of John, in which he does not include the PA.<sup>53</sup> One of Chrysostom's homilies on John covers the text beginning at John 7:45 and ending at 8:19, but it skips over 7:53-8:11.<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand, by the fourth century, the PA was regularly used by the Western Fathers as a biblical proof-text. Long before that, by the late second century, it was considered "gospel" even if it was not found in any of the canonical gospels.<sup>55</sup> Ambrose refers to the PA on

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<sup>49</sup> Bowen Ward, "The Case for John 7:53-8:11," in *Restoration Quarterly* 3.3 (1959): 131.

<sup>50</sup> Hodges, "The Text," 329.

<sup>51</sup> McMillan, "Textual Authority," 21.

<sup>52</sup> Ward, "The Case for John 7:53-8:11," 131; Burge, "Specific Problem," 143.

<sup>53</sup> Bridges, "Canonical Status," 213-4.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 1, Vol XIV: Homilies on the Gospel of St. John and the Epistle to the Hebrews, by St. Chrysostom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 186-190.

<sup>55</sup> Knust, "History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," 489, 490.

a number of occasions in his writings. Between AD 385 and 387, Ambrose wrote two related letters.<sup>56</sup> The first was to a magistrate, Studius, who had apparently asked Ambrose about showing mercy to a prisoner. In his reply, Ambrose uses Jesus' actions in the story of the adulterous woman as a model for this magistrate to follow.<sup>57</sup> The second letter was to Irenaeus, who had proposed a similar question.<sup>58</sup> In this second letter, Ambrose refers to "the acquittal of the woman who in the Gospel according to John was brought to Christ, accused of adultery."<sup>59</sup> Ambrose appears to quote passages directly, but it is not clear where in John Ambrose finds this story. Ambrose says that Jesus "said earlier: 'I judge no one,' but that statement comes in John 8:15, immediately after the traditional placement of the PA, unless Ambrose means to refer to the earlier statement about judging with right judgment (7:24). At any rate, according to Ambrose, the story is found in a manuscript(s) of John available to him. Ambrose additionally includes the PA in "a discussion of the fiftieth Psalm, a homily on Abraham, a discussion of the Holy Spirit, and a commentary on Luke."<sup>60</sup>

Jerome, in *Against the Pelagians*, uses the PA as evidence that no human being is without sin. Referring to John 8:3 as a proof-text, he says "None of the accusers of the woman taken in adultery were without sin. Christ wrote their names in the earth."<sup>61</sup> For Jerome, too, the PA was an authoritative part of the Gospel of John.

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<sup>56</sup> Catholic University of America, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* Vol. 26: Saint Ambrose, Letters, trans. Sister Mary Melchior Beyenka, O.P. (New York: Cima Pub. Co., 1947), 468, 492.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 492-494.

<sup>58</sup> It is not clear if both letters were written to Studius or Irenaeus. The manuscripts go with Studius for the second letter also. (*Fathers of the Church* St. Ambrose Letters, 468).

<sup>59</sup> *Fathers of the Church*, St. Ambrose Letters, 468.

<sup>60</sup> Knust, "History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," 507.

<sup>61</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Vol VI, Principal Works, by Jerome (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 469.

In AD 414, Augustine wrote a letter to Macedonius, in which he tells him to intercede for guilty persons, just as Jesus did. He recounts and quotes portions of the PA, though he does not give a specific biblical reference for the story.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, he quotes John 8:11 in his *Retractions*, completed in AD 427, in a discussion of forgiveness of unfaithful wives.<sup>63</sup> He also includes the PA in his tractate on John and uses it as the central proof text in his exhortation to husbands that they should show mercy to their repentant adulterous wives.<sup>64</sup> For Augustine, then, the PA was an authoritative part of John. Just as the moral rigour of the early fathers may have had a role in the PA's absence in their writing, one might wonder what effect Augustine's licentious past would have on his opinion on the MS evidence for the PA, for he does recognize that some manuscripts omit the story.<sup>65</sup> Does Augustine include the PA because it suits his experience? This may well be, but this would nevertheless be mitigated by his contemporaries' use of the PA as authoritative material.

There are several caveats that must be considered with the Greek patristic evidence. Knust notes, for instance, that the "Greek gospel manuscripts are unstable precisely where patristic authors did not agree."<sup>66</sup> The patristic fathers reflect the manuscript evidence oral tradition available to them. The fathers' writings are tied up in their context. We cannot therefore use the fathers as evidence for or against the inclusion of the PA *in addition to* the manuscript

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<sup>62</sup> Knust, "History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," 514; Catholic University of America, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* Vol. 20: Saint Augustine Letters, Vol. III (131-164), trans. Sister Wilfred Parsons, S.N.D. (New York: Cima Pub. Co., 1947), 286, 292.

<sup>63</sup> Catholic University of America, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* Vol. 60: Saint Augustine, *Retractions*, trans. Sister Mary Inez Bogan, R.S.M., Ph.D. (New York: Cima Pub. Co., 1947), 83.

<sup>64</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 1, Vol VII, Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, by St. Augustine (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 197-200; Knust, "History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," 514.

<sup>65</sup> See Augustine's *Confessions* for his confession of his licentious past; Hodge, "The Text," 330-31.

<sup>66</sup> Knust, "History of the *Pericope Adulterae*," 525.

evidence available to us, at least not insofar as they cite them. The fathers are a witness to the manuscripts of their time and may also reflect any oral tradition still being transmitted.

Furthermore, the church Fathers recognize both its presence and absence in the manuscript evidence.<sup>67</sup> If the PA is already absent from the Alexandrian (Eastern) manuscript tradition, it is not surprising that it would not be included in a Greek father's commentary. In addition, the early Greek fathers were morally rigorous; for Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian in particular, sexual sins were unforgiveable.<sup>68</sup> Gench suggests that "the ease with which Jesus extended mercy to an adulterous woman embarrassed the earliest Christian communities and undermined their own more severe penitential practices."<sup>69</sup> Burge argues, therefore, that this moral rigour would have prevented the PA from gaining access to the Gospels.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, this might give cause for these fathers to withhold comment on the PA even if it was present in manuscripts available to them. This, in Hodges view, makes sense of the data available to us in the MSS, versions, and Fathers.<sup>71</sup>

Augustine and Ambrose support this position. Hodges quotes from Augustine's *On Adulterous Marriages*: "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

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<sup>67</sup> Keith, "Initial Location," 223.

<sup>68</sup> Burge, "A Specific Problem," 147.

<sup>69</sup> Frances Taylor Gench, "John 7:53-8:11," in *Interpretation* 63.4 (October 2009): 398.

<sup>70</sup> Burge, "A Specific Problem," 147. See also, Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 335-6.

<sup>71</sup> Hodges, "The Text," 331.

granted permission to sin.”<sup>72</sup> Ambrose does not go as far as Augustine, but he does note the sensitivity people had toward the passage: “the Gospel which has been covered, could produce extraordinary anxiety in the inexperienced, in which you have noticed an adulteress presented to Christ and also dismissed without condemnation....How indeed could Christ err? It is not right that this should come into our mind.”<sup>73</sup>

Metzger rejects this notion and dismisses it without reference to these church fathers. He notes that there is no evidence of such an excision on moral grounds occurring in any other scripture. He also suggests the more important problem is the fact that the introductory verses—7:53-8:2—are also removed, even though they provide important details about the setting.<sup>74</sup> It is not difficult, however, to see why one might exclude those introductory verses. They do seem to go with 8:3-11, and without the rest of the PA may have been seen as too jarring to the flow of the passage. This is conjecture, of course, but so is the need to explain the omission of the introductory verses, since it is clear to most scholars that they go with the PA.

### **Internal Evidence: Style and Context**

#### *The question of style*

In terms of the internal manuscript evidence, scholars tend to disagree on whether or not the PA’s style fits its location in John. Fee notes that “contemporary critics generally agree that questions of internal evidence should usually be asked first and that the weight of the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 330-31.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>74</sup> Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 189.

manuscripts evidence should be applied secondarily.”<sup>75</sup> In the case of the PA, Salvoni argues that the manuscript evidence against the originality of the PA to John is “confirmed by the intrinsic study of style.”<sup>76</sup> Hengel claims that the PA “shows no signs of Johannine style.”<sup>77</sup> The reality, however, is that the question of internal evidence for or against the PA appears to be a highly subjective study. Most scholars suggest that its style is incompatible with John and that it breaks the flow of the narrative, suggesting that it was a later addition; others say that the PA fits John quite well, both in style and context.

Keith highlights the internal factors that mitigate against the PA being original to John. The PA’s language is more synoptic (particularly Lukan) than Johannine; the various dichotomies (e.g., light/dark) which appear in the narrative surrounding the PA are absent in the PA itself; and the presentation of the adulteress woman is vastly different from the presentation of other women in John.<sup>78</sup> The language of the PA appears to be the strongest of the arguments. For example, there are up to fourteen words in the PA that do not occur elsewhere in John (though, notably, of these four or five occur nowhere else in the entire New Testament).<sup>79</sup> Some of these words, such as *katakrino*, appear multiple times in the synoptics.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, certain

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<sup>75</sup> Gordon D. Fee, “Textual Criticism of the New Testament,” in *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 15.

<sup>76</sup> Fausto Salvoni, “Textual Authority for John 7:53-8:11,” in *Restoration Quarterly* 4.1 (1960): 11.

<sup>77</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: Scm Press, 1989), 89.

<sup>78</sup> Keith, “Recent and Previous Research,” 379-381.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 380, notes one scholar (Johnson) who finds thirteen words not found elsewhere in John and three scholars who record fourteen. However, Johnson says the number is fourteen. Keith lists four *hapax legomena* (Johnson, “Stylistic Trait,” 92); Cadbury lists five (Henry J. Cadbury, “A Possible Case of Lukan Authorship,” in *Harvard Theological Review* 10.3 (July 1917), 238.

<sup>80</sup> Ruis-Camps, “Pericope of the Adulteress Reconsidered,” 394.

words which are common to John are *not* present in the PA.<sup>81</sup> Based on stylistic similarities to the other evangelists, some scholars argue for a Lukan origin for the pericope, others that its origin is in Mark.<sup>82</sup>

Burge notes that the consistent use of *de* as an inter-sentence conjunction is highly unusual for John.<sup>83</sup> Poythress in fact closely studied the use of the conjunctions *de*, *oun*, and *kai* and asyndeton in John. According to Poythress, a significant variation in usage is needed before the authorship of a text can be doubted. He says that significant variation would be 10% of occurrences in a shorter passage or 5% of occurrences in a longer passage. A longer passage is a passage of ten to twenty verses or more.<sup>84</sup> Based on his study, all of John shows consistent usage of these conjunctions (with the occasional irregularity) except for the PA, where 15% of its uses of conjunctions were “deviant.” However, Poythress does not offer supporting evidence to back up his understanding of “significant variation” or “longer passage”. In addition, only when external evidence is strong are clear variations identified as such.<sup>85</sup> It is not clear, therefore, how internal statistical evidence is an independent factor in Poythress’ study.

Conversely, Johnson highlights some distinctively Johannine stylistic traits within the PA, particularly the narrator’s use of explanatory phrases to explain something in the text. He records ten of these interjections occurring in John, with seven of them using the same three key words, *de*, *touto*, and a form of the verb “to speak”, the other three using at least two of the three

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<sup>81</sup> Johnson, “Stylistic Trait,” 92.

<sup>82</sup> Luke: Salvoni, Ward, Cadbury; Mark: Rhuis-Camps.

<sup>83</sup> Burge, “Specific Problem,” 144.

<sup>84</sup> Vern S. Poythress, “Testing for Johannine Authorship by Examining the Use of Conjunctions,” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 46.2 (Fall 1984):350, 354.

<sup>85</sup> Poythress, “Conjunctions,” 353.

key words. One of these occurrences is in John 8:6. Johnson notes that this literary style is entirely unique to John's gospel. While some might suggest that this is a scribal attempt to harmonize the PA with John's style, Johnson suggests that it is too infrequent and subtle for it to have been attempted.<sup>86</sup> At any rate, if style can be copied as easily as some scholars suggest, style becomes an unreliable indicator of authorship.<sup>87</sup>

However, Johnson also argues that there are some significant problems with statistical analysis of this type. Poythress notes that conjunction use and asyndeton are "subject unusually frequently to corruption in the course of textual transmission," but nevertheless proceeds with the study as if it is an authoritative approach.<sup>88</sup> Johnson suggests three additional problems with the statistical method. First it "does not take into account the mood, purpose, and subject matter of the author."<sup>89</sup> This is a significant point, though in the case of John it would seem unusual for otherwise consistent usage to deviate only once, and for only a small portion of text, because of mood, purpose, or subject matter. More problematic is the study Johnson cites, which states that at least *ten thousand words* are required to statistically establish authorship. The 174 words of the PA would therefore be insufficient for this sort of study. Finally, Johnson notes that the statistical method can be used to disprove known authorship. He notes as an example that the PA has fewer *hapax legomena* and more Johannine-preferred words than does John 2:13-17, which

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<sup>86</sup> Johnson, "Stylistic Trait," 95-96. For further discussion on the question of the style of the PA, see Zane C. Hodges, "The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11): Exposition," in *Bibliotheca sacra* 137.545 (January - March 1980): 41-53; John Paul Heil, "The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress (John 7,53-8,11) Reconsidered," in *Biblica* 72.2 (1991): 182-191; and Daniel B. Wallace, "Reconsidering 'The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress Reconsidered'," in *New Testament Studies* 39.2 (April 1993): 290-296. Hodges and Heil argues for consistent Johannine style throughout the PA; Wallace argues rejects Heil's conclusions.

<sup>87</sup> Keith, "Initial Location," 211.

<sup>88</sup> Poythress, "Conjunctions," 350.

<sup>89</sup> Johnson, "Stylistic Trait," 93.

also uses synoptic and particular Markan and Lukan language uncommon to John.<sup>90</sup> These are, of course, the common evidential elements used *against* the PA, and they are found in an undisputed passage. It is clear, then, that the question of style is a highly subjective approach to the text, which often involves an earlier judgment of the text which is only confirmed by apparent inconsistencies, which automatically outweigh consistencies.<sup>91</sup>

### *The Question of Context*

Scholars make much of the fact that the PA seems to interrupt the flow of John. This, too, is a subjective area of criticism. The basic argument is that John flows quite smoothly without the PA, jumping from 7:52 to 8:12, though usually this assertion is not explained. It may simply be the fact that 8:12 carries on without the overnight pause of 7:53. At face value, however, the interchange between the chief priests and Pharisees, the temple police, and Nicodemus in 7:45-52 is just as much an interruption to the narrative as the PA, but there is no reason to take the PA as an interruption.

Comfort provides an explanation—something noticeably absent in most discussions of the problem of the context of the PA—on the sense of the PA interrupting the flow of the text. He notes that the Pharisees’ comment in 7:52 (“no prophet is to arise from Galilee” NRSV) is unaddressed in the PA. However, he argues that Jesus’ words in 8:12 are a veiled answer to the Pharisees’ claim. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (NRSV) is a reference to Isaiah 9:1-2, which gives a Galilean

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>91</sup> Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 528.

origin for the Messiah. In this view, 7:52 and 8:12 should stand side-by-side as a continuous narrative exchange.<sup>92</sup>

This may well be Jesus' intention with these words; we cannot know for sure. There are, however, a number of questions that need to be addressed in this regard. Are the Pharisees mentioned in 7:32ff part of the crowd that Jesus is addressing? If so, did they send the temple police *from within the crowd Jesus was addressing* in order to arrest him? Or is there more than one set of Pharisees, some in the crowd being taught by Jesus and others elsewhere, from where the police are sent? Does the exchange between the chief priests and Pharisees, the temple police, and Nicodemus (7:45-52) take place in the presence of the crowd or elsewhere—that is, does Jesus hear them, even though the comment is not addressed to him? If 8:12 is a veiled response to the Pharisees' statement about prophets from Galilee (even though the comment is not addressed to Jesus), does it need to come immediately after the Pharisees' statement? Does Jesus even need to address the Pharisees with his response? Is it possible that the exchange starting at 7:45 occurred at the end of the day so that no response could be made at a more “contextually appropriate” time—that is, even if the Pharisees required a response, is it possible that time simply did not allow it until later?

Answers to these questions would be conjecture, as the text does not present enough detail to establish them definitively, Comfort's explanation seems to make a number of unjustified assumptions about the narrative and context. What these questions illustrate, however, is that the PA *need not* be perceived as an interruption. The narrative may be referring to more than one set of Pharisees in different locations and their exchange with Nicodemus may well have come at the end of the day. If so, then the fact that John 7:53 begins, “Then they went

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<sup>92</sup> Comfort, “The Pericope of the Adulteress,” 146.

each to his home” is not jarring.<sup>93</sup> Even if it does seem somewhat intrusive, Childs notes that rough transitions and chronological confusion are hallmarks of John’s writing.<sup>94</sup> Keith does not think the PA is original to John, but still asserts that it fits its context quite well. He notes, for instance, the verbal aspect parallels in 7:52 and 53, and consistent themes (i.e., Jesus’ teaching authority, judgement) and setting (the Temple) before, during, and after the PA.<sup>95</sup>

### **Further Considerations**

It is unquestionable that the PA represents a unique textual problem. In terms of internal textual variants and external manuscript evidence it does stand out as an odd passage. It is particularly difficult because the size and nature of the passage seems to put it outside the standard text critical rules for determining original text. For instance, the shorter reading among variants is usually considered the original, since scribes tended to add and smooth out material. But what reason could a scribe have had to make such a major textual emendation? The PA’s inclusion is not simply a matter of similar words or smoothing out problems with verb inflection. Similarly, the more difficult reading is generally the more original. But how is the difficulty of the problem of the PA established? One might argue that the PA’s inclusion is the more difficult reading, since according to some it intrudes on the narrative. There is nothing in the surrounding context that *requires* the PA; there is no internal incentive for a scribe to add the material. Yet it is such a large and textually unusual passage that determining difficulty is not a clear task.

Internal text critical questions therefore result in subjective answers.

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<sup>93</sup> Though the various apparatuses used by modern translations to offset this text to indicate its doubtful origin certainly does interrupt the flow of the text. Even in NA27 and UBS4, the critical Greek texts, the textual markings make it difficult to read the PA as anything other than an interruption.

<sup>94</sup> Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 122.

<sup>95</sup> Keith, “Recent and Previous Research,” 381.

Furthermore, in spite of the dismissive view of most scholars and commentators, however, it is clear that the PA's status within the gospel of John is not as *clearly* doubtful as they suggest. It has an ancient history and is included in at least the oldest manuscripts—that is, it is of the same age more or less as the standard “oldest and best” manuscripts such as  $\aleph$ , A, B, and C. Codex D may not be among the “best” but the “Western” text should not be ignored.<sup>96</sup> There is the additional problem of the PA's authenticity and historicity, which scholars almost unanimously affirm, whether or not they see it as original to John. What then is to be done with the PA? Should it be excised from the Bible? Or can it be used with confidence as an authoritative text for the Church?

### *The Question of Authority*

A number of approaches to the question of authority have been taken by scholars. Based on the manuscript and internal evidence scholars dismiss the PA as not original to the Gospel of John. They say this with varying degrees of certainty. Few scholars connect this directly with the question of the PA's authority for the church, but the implication is that if it is not original to John's gospel, it is not an authoritative text.

Yet this is not an entirely satisfactory answer to the question of the PA's authority. As has been shown, there is good reason to believe in the PA's antiquity, and some scholars who do not see it as part of the original text of John argue for its origins in Luke or Mark. McMillan, while arguing that the PA is not Johannine or part of the original text, suggests that it “needs to be retained somewhere,” because of its tradition within the canon.<sup>97</sup> Comfort argues that the

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<sup>96</sup> Fee, “Textual Criticism,” 7.

<sup>97</sup> McMillan, “Textual Authority,” 22.

place to retain it is in the margins.<sup>98</sup> Bridges believes the PA is not original to John's Gospel, but nevertheless sees it as a "benign expansion of the Gospels," akin to the Old Testament apocrypha, and suggests that it be used with caution in preaching.<sup>99</sup> While his assessment of the PA as a "benign expansion" is true to the degree that it does not contradict anything in the Gospels and is consistent with Jesus' actions throughout, it is nevertheless an unsatisfactory conclusion to the matter. There are any number of benign expansions to the gospels that could be included, but that is not the purpose of text criticism. Most, if not all, New Testament textual variation is "benign", but that does not mean that one does not continue to pursue the "original text". Certainly "benign expansion" is not a satisfactory argument in the PA's favour.

Bridges does make the helpful note, however, of the fact that the question of the PA is a uniquely Protestant problem. Roman Catholics indirectly dealt with the question at the Council of Trent, where they declared the Latin Vulgate, which includes the PA, the sacred and canonical version of the scripture. The various Orthodox traditions also implicitly accept the PA, deriving as they do their New Testament from the Byzantine text, which overwhelmingly supports the PA. Similarly those Protestants who accept the Majority/Byzantine text as authoritative accept the PA.<sup>100</sup> These groups all in one way or another have a "received text" which they accept as authoritative, each of which includes the PA. This leaves only those Protestants who accept an eclectic approach to the text, as found in UBS4 and Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*, as having a problem.

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<sup>98</sup> Comfort, "Pericope of the Adulteress," 147.

<sup>99</sup> Bridges, "Canonical Status," 221.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

The fact that most textual corruption occurred before the third century is helpful in determining our approach to the PA. Barton notes that in the early church the written texts that became the New Testament were not necessarily seen as scripture but rather as a repository for Jesus' life and teachings—an aid to the oral presentation and preservation of the gospel. The writing of the Gospels did not put an end to the oral tradition, at least not initially. The tradition carried on orally and remained authoritative for a long time.<sup>101</sup> If the New Testament documents were seen as “a repository of tradition which can be cited and rearranged at will,” then it is not difficult to anticipate the possibility of major textual variation.<sup>102</sup> In this volatile textual period in the first century and a half or so of the church, it is not inconceivable that the PA could have been removed or inserted without affecting the “originality” of the text.

If the PA is indeed an ancient and authentic story from the life of Jesus, it would have retained its authority even in its oral form for some time, whether or not it was originally in John. At some point it may well have been inserted or reinserted because of the authority it maintained in the oral tradition. The important point is that at the time, even if it circulated only orally, the PA would have had the same authority as written scripture or possibly more. It is not inconceivable, then, that someone might seek to correct a deficiency or lack in this particular gospel and insert the story. Manuscript consistency was not the focus in these early years. Sacred texts may have required the outline of Jesus' life and teachings to be correct, but it did not require accuracy in all the minutiae.<sup>103</sup> Even in the fourth century, when Athanasius wrote his festal letter delineating the canonical New Testament writings, no one knows which manuscript

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<sup>101</sup> John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 81-93.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>103</sup> McDonald, “Wherein Lies Authority?” 215.

of John he read, and at any rate lists of this sort were not about specific canonical *manuscripts* but specific canonical *books*.<sup>104</sup>

At the same time, even if Athanasius did have a particular manuscript in hand, he did not speak for the entire church. Different communities regarded different texts—that is, variant forms of the manuscripts—as sacred, and the church did not take steps to correct these textual errors.<sup>105</sup> Metzger points out that Jerome and Eusebius discussed which textual variant for Mark 16:9-20 was the preferred reading. However, neither one of them makes any statement about which variant is canonical, even though by this time the canon was considered essentially closed.<sup>106</sup> He goes on to note that for the church Fathers

the category of ‘canonical’ appears to have been broad enough to include all variant readings (as well as variant renderings in early versions) that emerged during the course of the transmission of the New Testament documents while apostolic tradition was still a living entity, with an intermingling of written and oral forms of that tradition.<sup>107</sup>

Given this fact, Metzger argues that the longer ending of Mark, for example, though conclusively not original to Mark, is nevertheless to be accepted as part of the canonical text of Mark.

Barton’s insights and Metzger’s recognition of the Fathers’ lack of interest in identifying the particular canonical variants raise significant questions. If the gospel writers set out to create records of the life and teachings of Jesus, and one of them wrote the PA, what does this mean for its authority? Is the writer inspired or just the document, or is it the two together? Where does the PA fall into the category of “record of the life and teaching of Jesus”? Furthermore, McDonald notes that the ultimate authority for Christians is Jesus—what, then, does this mean for an

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<sup>104</sup> Burge, “Specific Problem,” 148; McDonald, “Wherein Lies Authority?” 223.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 208, 215-219.

<sup>106</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 269.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

authentic story of his life and teaching in the context of free and concurrent oral and textual transmission?<sup>108</sup> These questions are largely beyond the scope of this paper, but they must be asked and at the very least suggest caution in rejecting an ancient story found in some early manuscripts.

Another factor for the most part neglected in the literature, and alluded to above, is the possibility that there is more than one original of the Gospel of John. In *The New Testament as Canon*, Childs argues for the notion of multiple originals in a general sense, but unfortunately (and unexpectedly) he does not discuss the PA in his discussion of the Gospel of John. It is therefore not clear what Childs thought about this difficult passage. In a discussion about the difficulties in establishing the original text of the New Testament, Metzger and Ehrman note that “What can be said of all the books, however, is that each first appeared as a discrete publication, or series of publications, by its author(s).”<sup>109</sup> In a footnote to this statement, they refer to the possibility that multiple publications of Acts may have resulted in the Alexandrian and “Western” variations in Acts. They also note the possibility that the Gospel of John was written in several editions and that this could explain some of the textual problems in John.<sup>110</sup> Both editions, therefore, technically would be original. Like Childs, however, Metzger and Ehrman do not comment on the PA. Brown assumes multiple editions of John in his commentary on the gospel. He argues that this is closely tied to source theory, which posits that the writer or redactor of John used a variety of available sources, which would account for the stylistic variation and chronological difficulties of John’s gospel. In the multiple edition approach, the

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<sup>108</sup> McDonald, “Wherein Lies Authority?” 238.

<sup>109</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 272.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 272, 273.

various editions would have included or excluded material based on the sources. Brown holds to a four stage, two edition development of John. He notes several textual difficulties of John which could be explain by the multiple edition theory. Once again, he does not mention the PA in this section.<sup>111</sup> In spite of its glaring omission in discussions of multiple editions of John, it is certainly possible that John could have published editions both with and without the PA.

This brings up the question, hinted at in Burge's suggestion that the problem of the PA is a uniquely Protestant one, of evaluating scripture apart from the history and tradition of the church . The textual history of the PA is mixed, as is its early history in the church. The earliest fathers did not mention the PA as far as we know. Later Fathers, such as Augustine and Athanasius, accepted it as authoritative scripture. Eventually, more or less the entire church accepted it as scripture. To this end, Childs argues that

the text cannot be isolated from the actual tradents of the tradition who participated in the canonical process... The New Testament canon did not fall from heaven, nor is any view of its formation adequate which does not assign the historical early church the active and dominant role in its formation.<sup>112</sup>

Childs acknowledges the role of the Church in establishing a canonical, authoritative text of scripture. This assertion makes some Protestants uncomfortable (ironically, it would most likely be those who support the Majority Text and the unquestioned inclusion of the PA), but it is an important one to consider. This is difficult with respect to the PA, because the “actual tradents of the tradition”—scribes, the Fathers—apparently do not agree on the PA's inclusion in John. Metzger rightfully notes, furthermore, that “Childs provides no analysis of a specific textual problem nor does he define what he understands to be ‘the best received text’.”<sup>113</sup> Childs'

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<sup>111</sup> See Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, xxiv-xxxix.

<sup>112</sup> Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 43, 44.

<sup>113</sup> Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 269.

argument is nevertheless a helpful starting point for the PA: can Augustine and Athanasius simply be dismissed as mistaken in their use and understanding of the PA as canonical? The PA has relatively early use in the Church, is significantly older in terms of its manuscript tradition (as old as the Alexandrian texts) and known oral tradition, and the story itself has the earmarks of authenticity. With these facts in mind, it is difficult to simply dismiss the PA as non-authoritative for the church.

The aim of text criticism is to get at the “original text” and some might go so far as to say that what scholars have arrived at now is essentially the “original text”.<sup>114</sup> Yet in some respects “the original text”—insofar as that meant both written and oral tradition—was also of interest to ancient scribes as they copied manuscripts. Scribes saw themselves as helping the text by making it clear rather than producing manuscripts without error, sometimes adding whole portions in an effort to be complete or correct in their understanding of the text as they received it.<sup>115</sup> It is not clear, therefore, how the ancient manuscripts with their variations are in principle any different than the eclectic text we now find in UBS4 or *Novum Testamentum Graece*. UBS4 rates the omission of the PA with an “A” rating, indicating not just that it is *almost* certain (that would be a “B” rating), but simply that it is *certain*. Yet modern text critics do not have the advantage of a living oral tradition that was transmitted side-by-side with the written tradition as an equally, if not more, authoritative gospel tradition. Critics assume one single text from the start, when the early church and early manuscripts may well have assumed a living tradition both written and

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<sup>114</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, “Challenges in New Testament Textual Criticism for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52.1 (March 2009): 95. He argues that “what we have in our hands today is the original NT; we just do not know in all cases if it is in the text or in the apparatus.”

<sup>115</sup> Fee, “Textual Criticism”, 9.

oral resulting in a textual variety is was not concerned to correct. The PA may well fit in this volatile early textual history.

### **Conclusion**

The question of the PA's authority for the church is not easy to answer. Scholars have for more than a century questioned the PA's place in the New Testament and the Gospel of John. The implication is that it is not a canonical text. However, in spite of general scholarly doubts, text critics and scholars continue to return to this text to reconsider its merit in the Church's canon. It is clear that the PA has an ancient provenance. It was recognized in its place in John by at least the Western Church from a very early date. In the East, even though it is absent from its manuscripts and most early fathers there did not comment on it, there is nevertheless evidence of the PA existence there—in manuscripts markings and oral traditions. At any rate, the early church was not concerned about transmitting a consistent text. The internal evidence is a subjective area, but the case for its stylistic and contextual place in John is not overwhelmed by the case for its intrusion on the text. Furthermore, scholars agree that the PA is a historical and authentic story from the life of Jesus which, *at the very least*, was always part of the oral Gospel tradition. This oral tradition in the early years of the church was equally authoritative, possibly more authoritative, than the written tradition and may well have entered an additional edition of the Gospel of John. Over the years the written tradition became the final authority, but it did not develop apart from the church, nor without textual variation. With all these factors in mind, it is clear that the PA *can* be an authoritative text for the church.

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