

## THE PERICOPE OF THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY: AN INSPIRED TEXT INSERTED INTO AN INSPIRED TEXT?

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**Abstract:** *The textual evidence concerning the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery is examined. The conclusion is reached that it is not original to John's gospel. The historicity and canonicity of the account is then examined with the suggestion offered that the account may be historical and may even be an example of an inspired text inserted into an inspired text. If this conclusion is true, it opens the door to the account being used in the devotional, doctrinal, and doxological life of the church.*

**Key words:** *John 7:53–8:11, Pericope adulterae (canonicity of, textual history of), canonicity, textual criticism, Gospel of John, woman taken in adultery, textual criticism of Gospel of John*

Awkwardly nestled into the narrative context of the Gospel of John, the reader of many modern Bible versions comes across a story about Jesus and a woman who was caught in adultery. This particular story presents interesting textual questions (such as what its origin is and how it ended up in John's Gospel<sup>1</sup>). But it also represents significant pastoral challenges because, although it almost certainly does not belong in John's Gospel,<sup>2</sup> it still remains especially precious to many in the church today. Some would even say, "This is my favorite story about Jesus."<sup>3</sup> This paper will explore the textual evidence surrounding the pericope, address the question of the historicity and authenticity of the story, and examine the question of the canonicity of the passage.

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<sup>1</sup> Harald Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 96 asks, "Where does the pericope come from and why has it at such a late stage crept into the canonical Gospel tradition? Where does the account of Jesus and the adulteress come from?" I owe the discovery of this article to Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (4th ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 321 n. 37.

<sup>2</sup> The judgment of commentators is nearly unanimous on this point. For examples, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (Fourth Revised Edition)* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 187, 189; Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 319; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 413; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 333; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 143; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII* (AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 335; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:735: "the vast majority of scholars view it as inauthentic here."

<sup>3</sup> Cf. James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 36: "Indeed, some passages in the New Testament familiar and cherished by some Christians are now considered to be 'apocryphal.'"

## I. THE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Both the external evidence and the internal evidence point away from the original manuscript of John containing this pericope. A cursory glance at each reveals why this so.

1. *The external evidence.* The external evidence that the pericope reflects an interpolation<sup>4</sup> may be summarized as follows:

(1) Our earliest evidence of John's Gospel (the papyri  $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$  and  $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$ ) conspicuously lacks the story.<sup>5</sup> The excellent codices  $\aleph$  and B (both from the fourth century) do not include the pericope, as well as (presumably) codices A and C.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the earliest and presumably most reliable of our textual evidence for John's Gospel returns a negative answer.<sup>7</sup>

(2) The omission of the story occurs across all the major text types<sup>8</sup>—Alexandrian ( $\mathfrak{P}^{66}$ ,  $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$ , B, and C), Western ( $\aleph$ ,  $\text{syr}^c$ ,  $\text{syr}^s$ , a, f,  $\Gamma^*$ , q), Byzantine (A, X, Y,  $\Delta$ ,  $\Theta$ ,  $\Psi$ ), and even Caesarean ( $\aleph$ , 157, Old Georgian manuscripts).<sup>9</sup> Evidence for its omission appears as early as the second century ( $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$ ) and persists even as late as the 15th century (minuscule 1253). Thus, the omission of the story is remarkably widespread through time, across different geographical locations, and in different textual types.<sup>10</sup>

(3) The various locations where the account appears in different manuscripts of John and Luke testify against its originality.<sup>11</sup> Minuscule 225 includes the story after John 7:36. Several minuscules (including 1, 1076, 1570, and 1582) as well as some Armenian manuscripts include it at the end of the Gospel. The account was

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Keener, *John*, 735.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the endings of those papyri are also missing. As we will see, a few minuscules insert the pericope after John 21:24. It is unlikely, however, that the earliest papyri included the account at this location.

<sup>6</sup> Codex A is missing John 6:50–8:52, at the precise location where we would expect the story to occur if it appeared in that Codex. Similarly, Codex C lacks John 7:3–8:34. However, space considerations strongly suggest that even in their pristine form neither Codex A nor Codex C originally bore witness to the pericope. See Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 319; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 187.

<sup>7</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 319; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 187, 189.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 333.

<sup>9</sup> For text types, see Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography and Textual Criticism* (Nashville: B&H, 2005). See also Gordon D. Fee, "Codex Sinaiticus in the Gospel of John," *NTS* 15 (1968–1969): 23–44; as cited in Matthew P. Morgan, "The Legacy of a Letter: Sabellianism or Scribal Blunder in John 1.1c?," in *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence* (ed. Daniel B. Wallace; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 114 n. 109. Cf. Gordon Fee, "Codex Sinaiticus in the Gospel of John: A Contribution to Methodology in Establishing Textual Relationships," in *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (ed. Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee; SD 45; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 221–43; as cited in Brian J. Wright, "Jesus as  $\Theta\text{EO}\Sigma$ : A Textual Examination," in *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, 243 n. 66.

<sup>10</sup> The manuscripts cited in this paragraph come from Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 319; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 187.

<sup>11</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 320; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 188; cf. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 333; Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 413.

revised into Old Georgian manuscripts after John 7:44 in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The account has also been inserted into the Gospel of Luke after Luke 21:38 in f<sup>13</sup>.<sup>12</sup>

(4) Even some of our positive witnesses to the story serve as surprising evidence against its originality. For example, the copyists of codices E, M, S, and A included a critical mark to signal that they held doubts concerning the originality of the account.<sup>13</sup> And in this instance, it is a case of *persistent* doubts in the church about the originality of the account, since these codices are relatively late, ranging from the 8th to the 10th centuries.<sup>14</sup>

2. *The internal evidence.* The external evidence alone would be sufficient to confirm that we would not find this story in the autograph of John's Gospel. The internal evidence corroborates this conclusion.

(1) John 7:53 reads like a secondary, literary seam, as it provides a somewhat awkward transition from the discourses in chapter 7 to the pericope of the woman caught in adultery.

(2) John 8:12 and the following verses seem to pick up the same discourse cycle left off in John 7:52. This is good indication that 7:53–8:11 has been inserted.<sup>15</sup> It does not sit naturally in this context.<sup>16</sup>

(3) Although considerations of vocabulary and style frequently produce specious arguments, it is still worth noting that neither the vocabulary nor the writing style is typically Johannine in these verses.<sup>17</sup>

3. *Conclusion.* Given the weight of both the internal and the external evidence, the conclusion is virtually certain: this pericope did not come from the pen of John (at least as he first composed the Fourth Gospel).<sup>18</sup> Given the strength of the evidence, textual critic Bruce Metzger confidently asserts, "The case against its being of Johannine authorship appears to be conclusive."<sup>19</sup>

## II. THE HISTORICITY OF THE STORY

Usually when a text has been examined, the evidence weighed, and a textual conclusion reached, the task is finished. And when textual critics reach a negative

<sup>12</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 320; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 188–89. Cf. Bart D. Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," *NTS* 34 (1988): 28; and Beasley-Murray, *John*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 320; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 189; Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 413; Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 333.

<sup>14</sup> For the respective dates of E, S, and A, consult "Codices Graeci et Latini in Hac Editione Adhibiti," in NA<sup>28</sup>. Manuscript M was not included in the NA<sup>28</sup>. For its dating see the same section in the previous edition: "Codices Graeci et Latini in Hac Editione Adhibiti," in NA<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 320; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 188; Riesenfeld, *Gospel Tradition*, 95; cf. Keener, *John*, 736.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 27.

<sup>17</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 320; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 188; Riesenfeld, *Gospel Tradition*, 95, 97; Brown, *Gospel according to John I–XII*, 336; Keener, *John*, 735.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. independently the language of Beasley-Murray, *John*, 143.

<sup>19</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 320. Cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 188.

conclusion regarding the originality of a reading, the course of action for the interpreter is clear both practically and exegetically—ignore it.<sup>20</sup>

Things are not so simple, however, with the story of the woman caught in adultery. Because we are not dealing with the textual corruption of a word or phrase within a verse but rather with a whole block of text that has been inserted into John's Gospel, the natural question arises as to the historicity of the account itself and whether or not the church might still use it in its preaching and worship. In other words, even though the text-critical evidence points towards the account as a secondary addition to John's Gospel, we must still inquire into the status of the block of text in its own right.

Here we encounter a surprising phenomenon. Even while commentators and critics recognize that this account is secondary, they nonetheless vouch for its historicity. Bruce Metzger writes: "The story of the woman taken in adultery ... has many earmarks of historical veracity."<sup>21</sup> Bruce concurs: "These twelve verses ... constitute, in fact, a fragment of authentic Gospel material not originally included in any of the four Gospels."<sup>22</sup> Carson notes, "On the other hand, there is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books."<sup>23</sup> Riesenfeld states, "For excellent reasons one may consider the account of Jesus and the adulteress as a genuine early Christian element."<sup>24</sup> Even a textual critic such as Bart Ehrman says that this pericope "has a decided air of authenticity"<sup>25</sup> and that "this story appears to be very ancient and has as good a claim to authenticity as any of its Synoptic parallels."<sup>26</sup> What led these textual critics and commentators to see the possibility of a record of an actual historical event in the life of Jesus<sup>27</sup> even while recognizing that the story does not belong in John's Gospel? Literary considerations, historical considerations, an early reference to the account, and the details of the narrative all converge to suggest the historicity of the account.

1. *Literary considerations.* Literary considerations point in the direction of an early origin for the pericope. We have noted, negatively, that this story is non-Johannine. We may say positively, however, that this particular piece of text pre-

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the comments in Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 280. But they also point out other historical uses for readings rejected on text-critical grounds (p. 281).

<sup>21</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 319.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 413.

<sup>23</sup> Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 333.

<sup>24</sup> Riesenfeld, *Gospel Tradition*, 97.

<sup>25</sup> Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 35. Technically, Ehrman is referring to his hypothetical reconstruction of one of the sources he sees behind the story presented in our modern Bibles (cf. pp. 34–35).

<sup>26</sup> Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 36. Brown calls the story "quite plausible" (*Gospel according to John I–XII*, 335). Keener notes the widespread agreement among scholars on this point (*John*, 736).

<sup>27</sup> Ehrman uses similar language (though independently): "And is it possible that either of them represents an authentic episode from the life of Jesus?" ("Jesus and the Adulteress," 34; cf. p. 24).

servers literary traces of *synoptic* Jesus tradition.<sup>28</sup> The general contour of the story has many Synoptic elements, as the comparison below with other Synoptic Jesus stories from Mark reveals.

Table 1: Synoptic Elements in the Pericope of the Adulterous Woman<sup>29</sup>

	John	Mark
Jesus at Mount of Olives/Bethany	8:1	11:1
Jesus teaches the people in the temple	8:2	12:35
A dilemma is presented to Jesus	8:3–5	12:14–15, 18–23
The dilemma involves issues of Torah	8:5	12:14, 19, 28
The dilemma is intended as a trap	8:6	12:13b, 15
Jesus answers cleverly/wisely	8:7	12:15b–17, 24–27
Jesus’s answer wins the controversy	8:9–11	12:17b, 34b

Not only does the story possess many Synoptic elements, the vocabulary of the story is Synoptic (and—remarkably—closest to Luke’s vocabulary).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Riesnefeld, *Gospel Tradition*, 96–97; Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 24, 42 n. 48, 43 n. 60; Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 413; Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 333; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 143–44; Keener, *John*, 735, 737.

<sup>29</sup> I did not originally follow Ehrman on this point, though his article shaped the final form of this table. See Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 36, 42 n. 48, 43 n. 57. Another writer possibly used language similar or identical to “Jesus’ answer wins the controversy” at the bottom of the table.

<sup>30</sup> Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 24, 38 n. 2, and 43 n. 60; Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 333–34; Brown, 336. On a side note, the Lukan vocabulary of the account poses certain problems for redactional studies in the Gospels such as that of Bruce Chilton who, based on vocabulary and style, seeks to tease out what elements in Luke 4:16–21 stem from the tradition behind the Gospel and what elements came from the author himself (see Bruce Chilton, “Announcement in Nazara: An Analysis of Luke 4:16–21,” in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2: *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* [ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003], 147–72). If, however, there is a Jesus tradition bearing Lukan style that does not stem from the author of Luke, such a study becomes deeply problematic and for obvious reasons. How are we to determine whether a given instance of Lukan style in the passage under consideration is the result of the author’s own hand or if it came, perhaps, from the author’s penchant to choose from Jesus tradition reflecting this particular style? One solution to this methodological impasse would be to return to the now-discarded claim that Luke did in fact originally write this pericope (cf. Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 38 n. 2) but for whatever reason decided not to include it in his Gospel.

Table 2: Synoptic Vocabulary in the Pericope of the Adulterous Woman<sup>31</sup>

	Matthew	Mark	Luke/Acts	John
ἔπορεύθησαν (went)	Matt 2:9; 28:16		Luke 9:56	
ἕκαστος (each one)	Matt 18:35; 26:22		Luke 2:3; 13:15 Acts 2:6, 8, 38; 11:29	John 6:7; 16:32 (and 3 times in Revelation) <sup>32</sup>
ὄρος τῶν Ἐλαιῶν (Mount of Olives)	Matt 21:1; 24:3; 26:30	Mark 11:1; 13:3; 14:26	Luke 19:29, 37; 21:37; 22:39	
ὄρθρου (early)			Luke 24:1	
παρεγένετο (they came)			Luke 8:19; 11:6; 19:16	
εἰς τὸ ἱερόν (to the temple)	Matt 21:12, 23	Mark 11:11, 15	Luke 2:27; 18:10; 19:45 Acts 3:1, 2, 3, 8; 5:21; 19:27; 21:26, 28, 29; 24:6; 25:8	John 7:14
λαὸς (people)	Matt 4:16; 15:8; 27:25	Mark 7:6	Luke 1:21; 7:29; 18:43; 19:48; 20:6; 21:38; 23:35 Acts 3:9, 11; 5:13; 7:17; 18:10	(once in Revela- tion)
οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι (the scribes and Pharisees) <sup>33</sup>	Matt 23:2, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29		Luke 5:21, 30; 6:7; 11:53; 15:2	

<sup>31</sup> This table does not tabulate total occurrences of each of these words or phrases, but rather the occurrences of the word or phrase in the particular form it takes in John 7:53–8:11. For similar, but somewhat different, data that inspired my own research for this chart, see Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 43 n. 60. (Similar data is presented by Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 334).

<sup>32</sup> If the same author wrote the book of Revelation as the Gospel of John, it would increase the number of Johannine occurrences of some of these vocabulary words. A consideration of that question is far outside the scope of this study, but in light of the possibility we also note the number of occurrences in Revelation for these words/phrases.

<sup>33</sup> With minor variations in some of the verses listed.

ἐν μέσῳ (in the midst)	Matt 10:16; 14:6; 18:2, 20	Mark 6:47; 9:36	Luke 2:46; 8:7; 10:3; 21:21; 22:27, 55; 24:36 Acts 1:15; 2:22; 4:7; 17:22; 27:21	(7 times in Revelation)
διδάσκαλε (teacher)	Matt 8:19; 12:38; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36	Mark 4:38; 9:17, 38; 10:17, 20, 35; 12:14, 19, 32; 13:1	Luke 3:12; 7:40; 9:38; 10:25; 11:45; 12:13; 18:18; 19:39; 20:21, 28, 39; 21:7	John 1:38; 20:16
πειράζοντες (testing)	Matt 16:1; 19:3	Mark 8:11; 10:2	Luke 11:16	
κατηγορεῖν (to charge)			Luke 6:7; 23:2 Acts 24:2, 19; 28:19	
πρεσβυτέρων (elders) <sup>34</sup>	Matt 15:2; 16:21; 26:47; 27:12, 41; 28:12	Mark 7:3, 5; 8:31; 14:43; 15:1	Luke 9:22 Acts 15:4; 16:4; 24:1	(6 times in Revelation)
πορεύου (go)	Matt 2:20		Luke 5:24; 7:50; 8:48; 10:37; 13:31; 17:19 Acts 8:26; 9:15; 10:20; 22:10, 21; 24:25	John 4:50; 20:17

In historical Jesus studies, one test of a tradition's historicity is if it coheres with other Jesus traditions previously judged to be authentic. This is called "the criterion of coherence."<sup>35</sup> Since the account of the woman caught in adultery co-

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<sup>34</sup> Admittedly, though, the Synoptics seem to use this term in a more technical sense than we see in this passage.

<sup>35</sup> Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987), 247–48; cf. Robert H. Stein, "The 'Criteria' for Authenticity," in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1: *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; 1981; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 250–52. I also owe a great deal of understanding to N. T. Wright's practical application of these criteria modeled throughout *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

heres nicely with authentic Jesus tradition,<sup>36</sup> that gives us good reason to believe that the story is likewise authentic.<sup>37</sup>

2. *Historical considerations.* Historical considerations also suggest an early origin for the tradition. It is not until the fifth century that we have a manuscript of the Scriptures (Codex Bezae) attesting the story.<sup>38</sup> Some significant evidence, however, for the pericope's existence predates Bezae.<sup>39</sup> For example, in the writings of Didymus the Blind, we read the following:

We find, therefore, in certain gospels [the following story]. A woman, it says, was condemned by the Jews for a sin and was being sent to be stoned in the place where that was customary to happen. The saviour, it says, when he saw her and observed that they were ready to stone her, said to those who were about to cast stones, "He who has not sinned, let him take a stone and cast it." If anyone is conscious in himself not to have sinned, let him take up a stone and smite her. And no one dared. Since they knew in themselves and perceived that they themselves were guilty in some things, they did not dare to strike her.<sup>40</sup>

Didymus presents a version of the story with slightly different details<sup>41</sup> (and we do not know if that is due to faulty memory, paraphrase, or a genuinely different tradition) but the contours are generally recognizable. This is the story of the woman caught in adultery. Therefore we know that as early as the fourth century the story was already being inserted into Gospel accounts even if we do not now possess those particular manuscripts.<sup>42</sup>

We also have attestation to the story in the third century in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* in Syrian:<sup>43</sup>

But if you do not receive him who repents, because you are without mercy, you shall sin against the Lord God. For you do not obey our Saviour and our God, to do as even He did with her who had sinned, whom the elders placed before Him, leaving the judgment in His hands, and departed. But He, the searcher of

<sup>36</sup> I assume here that all the Jesus traditions in the Gospels are authentic. A defense of that background assumption is certainly possible but outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 34–36. I owe thanks to Robert Morgan who pointed out to me that Charlesworth offers this specific argument as well about the pericope of the woman caught in adultery (Charlesworth, *Historical Jesus*, 24–25).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Riesenfeld, *Gospel Tradition*, 97; Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 320; Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 31. By this point it presumably also had made its way into the exemplar(s) used to translate a select few Armenian manuscripts (see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 188 n. 1).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Riesenfeld, *Gospel Tradition*, 97; Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 26, 28, 31, 32, 39 n. 18.

<sup>40</sup> *Ecclesiastes Commentary* 223.6b–13a (as translated in Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 25).

<sup>41</sup> Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 32–38, makes (perhaps too) much of these differences. Some of the differences he reads into the story. For example, it may be valid to see the setting of Didymus's story as *en route* to the execution rather than at "the place of execution" as Ehrman argues (pp. 32, 43 n. 60) because Didymus writes that she "was being sent to be stoned." A different setting than the one Ehrman supposes opens the door to more confluence between the various versions of the story.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Michael W. Holmes, "The Fragments of Papias: Introduction," in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (ed. Michael W. Holmes; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 558; Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 26, 28, 31, 37, 39 n. 18 (but cf. p. 32).

<sup>43</sup> Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 32; Riesenfeld, *Gospel Tradition*, 98.

hearts, asked her and said to her: "Have the elders condemned you, my daughter?" She says to him: "Nay, Lord." And he said unto her: "Go, neither do I condemn you."<sup>44</sup>

Ehrman makes much of the differences between the account of Didymus the Blind and the one recounted in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, arguing that the two versions were combined to form what is now the standard version.<sup>45</sup> However, the details of the stories are not so incompatible with each other as to be absolutely incapable of any kind of harmonization.<sup>46</sup> And if they were compatible enough to be combined in the way Ehrman envisions, then alternatively why could they not each represent partial paraphrases of a larger account which happens to appear in our current Bibles at John 7:53–8:11?<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum* 8.2.24 (as quoted in Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 33). Ehrman follows the translation of Arthur Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac* (CSCO 177; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1979).

<sup>45</sup> Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 32–38; cf. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 557–58. Ehrman states, "These differences cannot be lightly dismissed" ("Jesus and the Adulteress," 34).

<sup>46</sup> Ehrman even admits, "These stark contrasts do not, of course, mean that the stories are *totally* dissimilar" ("Jesus and the Adulteress," 41 n. 44); cf. p. 37. In fact, there are Synoptic accounts that diverge in similar ways but nonetheless recount the same events. This remains the case even if we were to grant Ehrman his example of the anointing of Jesus as a potential parallel instance of "confusion of independent stories" (*ibid.*, 41 n. 44; cf. p. 37). (Though we note that "confusion" is not the right word here even if these are distinct stories; see Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 146–47.)

<sup>47</sup> More than one person suggested to Ehrman that the *Didascalia Apostolorum* version of the story is a paraphrase ("Jesus and the Adulteress," 41 n. 46). A complete interaction with Ehrman's conflation theory lies beyond the scope of this paper, but several observations are in order. (1) Even if Ehrman is correct that Didymus represents a genuinely different tradition, it is still possible that this tradition itself arose as a garbled transmission of the account as found in our current Bibles. There are, in fact, a great many redactional relationships possible between these various early accounts of the woman caught in adultery, and we may not be able to answer the question of whether we are dealing with a conflation, a confusion, or a complementary account. (2) Ehrman notes, "Some researchers have argued for the antiquity of the traditional version of the PA because of its remarkable affinities to certain Lukan traditions about Jesus. . . . It is particularly striking that *all* of these Lukan parallels must have derived from this, the second of our two stories [i.e. the *Didascalia Apostolorum*]" (43 n. 60, emphasis original). But do these parallels "derive from" it or do they lie behind it? None of the Lukan elements he proceeds to list are explicitly present in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. It is exponentially more likely that the *Didascalia Apostolorum* is a summary of an already Lukan version than that a later redactor added elements that happen to turn out Lukan. Therefore, I disagree with Ehrman when he claims that "this counter proposal . . . is not inherently more plausible than that being advocated here" (42 n. 46). (3) The question then becomes whether the Lukan account behind the *Didascalia Apostolorum* included the saying of Jesus in Didymus. It may very well have because the *Didascalia Apostolorum* appears to be missing something that Didymus supplies. It recounts that "the elders placed before Him [the woman], leaving the judgment in His hands, and departed." This is very strange. If the entire purpose of the episode is to trap Jesus, it is odd that they depart before he even renders a verdict! One gets the sense that something is missing from this account, perhaps some action or statement of Jesus that made them depart prematurely—perhaps something like what we see in Didymus's version (cf. *ibid.*, 37–38!). Therefore, we may have to presuppose something like the saying of Jesus in Didymus in order to adequately explain the flow of the action in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. (4) There is significant evidence that Papias was aware of the full version of the story in the early second century. Agapius of Hierapolis in the tenth century summarizes the account he found in Papias this way: "When the people led her before Christ our Lord, he spoke to the Jews who had brought her to him: 'Whoever among you is himself certain that he is innocent of that of which she is accused, let him now bear witness against her.' After he had said this, they gave him no

So, very clear evidence for the pericope emerges by the fourth and fifth centuries. This period of church history, however, is *prima facie* unlikely to have produced the story. Moralism crept into the church very quickly,<sup>48</sup> and this was especially true of moralism surrounding sexual relationships. Metzger states, “No ascetically minded monk would have invented a narrative that closes with what seems to be only a mild rebuke on Jesus’ part.”<sup>49</sup> Riesenfeld points out that the story is completely out of step with the penance system emerging in the early church.<sup>50</sup>

The criterion of dissimilarity in historical Jesus studies places a high probability on the authenticity of an account about Jesus if the account portrays him in a manner contrary to or in tension with later church thought.<sup>51</sup> The pericope of the woman caught in adultery passes the test of dissimilarity, at least in relationship to the era in which we first find extensive attestation to it.

### III. AN EARLY REFERENCE TO THE ACCOUNT

The conclusions that we have reached on literary and historical grounds may be corroborated by Papias, the late first/early second century bishop of Hierapolis.<sup>52</sup> Papias knew of the story or one very much like it. Eusebius tells us of Papias, “And he has related another account about a woman accused of many sins before the Lord, which the Gospel According to the Hebrews contains.”<sup>53</sup> Is this the story of the woman caught in adultery? The brevity of Eusebius’s summary as well as a minor difference in detail (“many sins” versus presumably one act of adultery in John 8) make certainty impossible,<sup>54</sup> but neither do these factors rule out a positive identification between the two accounts.

answer and went away” (Fragments of Papias 23; Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 589). Agapius summarizes Papias’s account as containing the saying of Jesus as found in Didymus but having a setting along the lines of the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. If Agapius has accurately summarized the content of Papias, then Papias knew the full account.

<sup>48</sup> This language (or similar language) may have been used by a seminary professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>49</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 319.

<sup>50</sup> Riesenfeld, *Gospel Tradition*, 98–106. Riesenfeld summarizes, “Against the background of the growing institution of penance, it is understandable to us that the account of Jesus and the adulteress could not very well be used as an example in the preaching and parenesis of the early church” (p. 105). Cf. Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 42 n. 53 and Beasley-Murray, *John*, 143.

<sup>51</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 247–48; Stein, “‘Criteria’ for Authenticity,” 240–45; cf. this principle applied throughout Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* and idem, *Resurrection of the Son of God*.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. the similar statement by Ehrman in “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 36–37 (and 43 n. 60). While reading Ehrman’s article, I wrote in the margin of p. 29, “If the evidence from Papias is about the PA this is strong corroboration of the position that this story is early Synoptic tradition that was reached mainly on the basis of the evidence in the story itself.” On Papias, see Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 556–60. Cf. Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 334.

<sup>53</sup> *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.17 (Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 569). Cf. Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 29. Ehrman has (rightly, in our view) argued, “It is not clear from Eusebius’s statement whether Papias had found the story in the Gospel according to the Hebrews or whether Eusebius himself had [found it there]. . . . The context suggests that it was Eusebius who made the identification” (“Jesus and the Adulteress,” 29).

<sup>54</sup> Beasley-Murray (*John*, 143) as well as Brown (*Gospel according to John I–XII*, 335) regard as uncertain whether we can identify the account of Papias with that of the woman caught in adultery.

The minor difference in detail is far from definitive. If Eusebius is recounting from memory something that Papias recounted from memory, it is not hard to see how adultery could have become “many sins.” Alternatively, Papias may be operating on the assumption that the woman in the story was a habitual adulterer<sup>55</sup> making it all the easier to catch her in the act. Or Papias (or Eusebius) may have conflated in his memory the story of the woman caught in adultery with the story of the woman who anointed Jesus in Luke 7:36–50 whose many sins (Luke 7:47!) the Lord forgave. These suggestions are all little more than speculation, but none of them are implausible and any one of them could explain the differences between Papias’s version of the account and the pericope of the woman caught in adultery as it now stands.

Though Eusebius does not provide the full account, he supplies enough contour to make a reasonable comparison with the pericope of the woman caught in adultery. In both cases we have a woman who is a sinner brought before the Lord on account of that sin. Though Eusebius does not give the verdict rendered by Jesus in Papias’s account, it is exceedingly unlikely that the version available to him ended with the Lord condemning the woman! We have no good reason to doubt that the implied ending of Papias’s account matched the verdict of John 8:11.

In addition, from the standpoint of historical probability, it seems less likely that Papias presents an independent tradition uncannily similar to the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery than that he offers a (perhaps) slightly modified version of that same tale.<sup>56</sup> Demonstrating the truth of this judgment would, of course, require a fuller account of Papias’s version. But we can conclude at a minimum that if this is not our story,<sup>57</sup> it is at least one extraordinarily like it.

Papias’s testimony here is also significant because it was his practice to collect Jesus traditions:

I will not hesitate to set down for you, along with my interpretations, everything I carefully learned then from the elders and carefully remembered, guaranteeing their truth. ... And if by chance someone who had been a follower of the elders should come my way, I inquired about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter said, or Philip, or Thomas or James, or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord’s disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and abiding voice.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. incidentally Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 337.

<sup>56</sup> Ehrman states that “it is normally assumed that [Papias] refers here to the PA” (“Jesus and the Adulteress,” 29) and cites the corroborating arguments presented by Ulrich Becker (40 n. 27). The treatment of Papias presented above is independent of Becker as I unfortunately did not have access to his work.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. the wording of Brown, *Gospel according to John I–XII*, 335.

<sup>58</sup> *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3–4 (Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 565).

The fact that this story (or one very much like it) came down to Papias through his conversations with those who had known the apostles points not just to the antiquity of the account<sup>59</sup> but also suggests its apostolicity.

#### IV. THE DETAILS OF THE ACCOUNT

The account itself has little marks of authenticity. The portrait of Jesus presented in it is entirely akin to the picture of Jesus that we see in unquestionably authentic Jesus traditions (the criterion of coherence again at work).<sup>60</sup> Examples of this in the story include Jesus's clever response to a tricky question,<sup>61</sup> his extension of mercy to sinners, and how he at first seems to subvert the Mosaic Law, yet at a deeper level his approach to the situation actually ends up confirming the Mosaic Law.<sup>62</sup>

It is also curious that someone fabricating a story such as this would leave out the content of Jesus's memo in the sand.<sup>63</sup> The account reads like an eyewitness report that happened to lack this particular detail, perhaps because the person originally recounting the event did not know himself what Jesus scribbled there.<sup>64</sup> Naturally, someone decided later to include this detail. Minuscule 264 adds to verse 6, "the sins of each of them," to explain what Jesus was writing. And a few manuscripts—U, 700, etc.—add the same gloss to verse 8.<sup>65</sup> This is exactly the kind of pattern we see when we have an early account that piques curiosity through the omission of details.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>59</sup> As acknowledged by Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 36–37.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 143.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 36–37.

<sup>62</sup> Jesus seems to subvert the law by not calling for the execution of the woman as prescribed by Moses (Lev 20:10). However, an execution could not be carried out without the testimony of at least two or three witnesses (Deut 17:6; 19:15). By the end of the episode, no witnesses remain to condemn the woman, therefore Jesus's verdict upholds the Mosaic law (cf. Keener, *John*, 738). This would be the modern-day equivalent of the prosecution failing to appear in court and the case therefore being dismissed. Dismissing such a case in our modern legal context would not subvert the law but be exactly what the law requires. The same is true, we contend, in Jesus's historical context. On the presumed historicity of the more subversive aspects of Jesus's teaching in general, see James H. Charlesworth, "Introduction: Why Evaluate Twenty-five Years of Jesus Research?," in *Jesus Research: An International Perspective* (Princeton-Prague Symposia Series on the Historical Jesus 1; ed. James H. Charlesworth and Petr Pokorný; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 6; Craig Evans, "'Have You Not Read ...?' Jesus' Subversive Interpretation of Scripture," in *Jesus Research*, 185, citing Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 132.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. incidentally Keener, *John*, 737–38.

<sup>64</sup> Keener quotes Westcott's comment *in loc.* that the "very strangeness of the action marks the authenticity of the detail" (*John*, 738 n. 332).

<sup>65</sup> Indeed, this is an interesting case of a textual variant within a textual variant. Cf. Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament*, 320; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 190; Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 416.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 190. Again, a comparison with the apocryphal gospels is instructive. The classic example is the boyhood of Jesus, largely unrecorded in the Gospels, but then supplied by these later, apocryphal accounts.

## V. THE CANONICITY OF THE ACCOUNT

One final question naturally suggests itself. With the story of the woman caught in adultery, we are in the awkward position of having an account that clearly does not belong in John's Gospel, but nonetheless boasts almost equally impressive evidence of historical authenticity. But it is not enough to simply move from historical authenticity to the legitimacy of receiving and using the account as Scripture today.<sup>67</sup> We need to ask the further question of the canonical status of the account.<sup>68</sup> In other words, is this account inspired Scripture? And if so, how would we know?

At first, we might think such questions impossible to answer. There is, however, a simple methodology ready at hand. We may recognize or reject this text as Scripture the same way that we recognize or reject any other text as Scripture. The church had several criteria for recognizing a text as Scripture, among which were apostolicity, antiquity, historical authenticity, orthodoxy, usage, and spiritual power.<sup>69</sup> We must examine this pericope in light of these criteria.

1. *Apostolicity and antiquity.* We have already seen that this account most likely formed part of the tradition passed down to Papias by those who had known the apostles. This suggests that the substance of the account is in fact apostolic.

We do not know, however, at what point in time the story was first committed to writing. A late date of composition could certainly be considered a challenge to canonicity. The Muratorian Fragment dismisses the canonicity of the *Shepherd of Hermas* on the grounds that it, "was written ... quite recently, in our own times."<sup>70</sup> The situation is slightly different between the pericope of the woman caught in adultery and *Hermas*, however. *Hermas* was never part of the tradition handed down by the apostles themselves, whereas this account does have some evidence suggesting apostolicity. It is also important to note at this point that direct authorship by an apostle is not necessary for a writing to fulfill the requirement of apostolicity.<sup>71</sup> It is sufficient if the writing in question is based on genuine apostolic tradition (cf. Luke 1:1–4 and the Gospel of Mark). If the account was not committed to writing

<sup>67</sup> Indeed, such a move could be made even in regard to some of the *agrapha* statements of Jesus, yet there are few proponents of using these in the life of the church. Conversely, many are willing to move directly from a positive conclusion concerning the historicity of the pericope of the woman caught in adultery directly to its use in the church. But this argument is missing a term, namely, the issue of canonicity.

<sup>68</sup> Brown is one of the few scholars who rightly treats issues of "authorship" and issues of "canonicity" as "distinct questions" (*Gospel according to John I–XII*, 335). He independently follows a progression of thought similar to this article, first asking about the pericope's status in relation to John's Gospel (*ibid.*), then about its possible origin from a wider Johannine circle (pp. 335–36). He then considers the question of canonicity, giving the perspectives and reasons of both those who would support its canonicity and those who would reject it (p. 336).

<sup>69</sup> For slightly different lists, see Lee M. MacDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (rev. and exp. ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 229–49; F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 255–69. I owe a great debt of thought on the spiritual power criterion to David Crump of Calvin College.

<sup>70</sup> As quoted in Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 161.

<sup>71</sup> Others have made this point as well.

until later (say, in the second or third century), we still could have a situation in which a later writing contained a genuinely apostolic tradition. For what it is worth, given the literary and historical considerations outlined above, we feel it is unlikely that the story only reached written form as late as the third century.

2. *Historical authenticity and orthodoxy.* We have seen that the story lays excellent claim to historical authenticity. Likewise, there is nothing heretical in it. It reads very much like something that Jesus might say and do and is entirely in keeping with the spirit of his earthly ministry. The overall teaching of the passage regarding the mercy extended by the Lord as well as the requirement of repentance for the sinner are congruent with recognized scriptural teaching on these subjects. In addition, the passage portrays mercy and repentance in that finely balanced way that Scripture does. Neither element “runs away” with the story, but a beautiful synthesis of both is maintained.<sup>72</sup> Thus the account appears to cohere with recognized Scripture both in its explicit statements about mercy and repentance and in the way it has balanced its emphasis on each of these elements. In short, the account appears to be quite orthodox.

3. *Usage and spiritual power.* Lee MacDonald elevates usage to the primary criterion that historically determined the canon: “Usage in this sense [i.e. unanimous agreement], as well as in the sense of widespread use in the larger churches of the third through the fifth centuries, is probably the primary key to understanding the preservation and canonization of the books that make up our current NT.”<sup>73</sup> If this perspective is correct, it should come as no surprise, for one of the marks of inspiration in a document is that that document is “useful” (2 Tim 3:16). We would expect a text that is inspired to be useful over time and across location.<sup>74</sup>

How useful historically has the church found the pericope of the woman caught in adultery to be? The account was certainly not used as frequently in the early church as it came to be later on. A review of the patristic evidence, however, reveals some noteworthy examples of the Church Fathers using the account, and using the account as Scripture no less, in addition to the evidence from the early church cited above.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Cf. independently the comments of Brown, *Gospel according to John I–XII*, 337.

<sup>73</sup> MacDonald, *Formation*, 249. Brown also helpfully comments that, “For some ... the fact that the story is a latter addition to the Gospel ... means that it is not canonical Scripture (even though it may be an ancient and true story). For others, canonicity is a question of traditional ecclesiastical acceptance and usage” which could then open the door to receiving the text as Scripture even though it was not originally in John’s Gospel (p. 336).

<sup>74</sup> As an aside, this may very well be why there could not be an instantaneous and unanimous recognition of all the books of the Bible. However, all the books eventually recognized as canonical “proved themselves” (so to speak) over time as the church in many different places and at many different times found them useful.

<sup>75</sup> For independent studies of the pericope in light of the patristic evidence see Tommy Wasserman, “The Strange Case of the Missing Adulteress,” in *The Pericope of the Adulteress in Contemporary Research* (ed. David Alan Black and Jacob N. Cerone; LNTS 551; London: T&T Clark, 2016), 33–64; and Jennifer Knust, “‘Taking Away From’: Patristic Evidence and the Omission of the *Pericope Adulterae* from John’s Gospel,” in *ibid.*, 65–88.

In his debates with Jerome at the end of the fourth century, Rufinus contains a possible periphrastic reference to John 8:11 when he writes, “For thus it is written: ‘Thou has sinned; be at peace.’”<sup>76</sup> The “thus it is written” is a telltale signal that Rufinus regards the material that follows as Scripture, and John 8:11 is the closest scriptural reference corresponding to these words. A little further on, Rufinus directly, clearly, and explicitly cites the story again against Jerome as an injunction against judging others for one’s own faults, corroborating our conclusion concerning his earlier reference.<sup>77</sup> Jerome himself appealed to the passage in the early fifth century to settle the doctrinal point of the sinfulness of man in his polemic against the Pelagians.<sup>78</sup> Also in the fifth century, Leo the Great preaching on the passion of Christ noted that Judas despaired of receiving salvation even though he had heard many examples of the Lord’s forgiveness including when Christ pardoned the woman caught in adultery. Therefore Judas did not receive salvation.<sup>79</sup>

Augustine made great use of the passage in his pastoral and writing career which spanned the end of the fourth century to the beginning of the fifth century. In order to refute the Manichean Faustus’s criticism of the actions of the OT prophets, Augustine cites the example of Jesus writing in the sand in John 8:6 and notes how it could be misunderstood as “childishness” to those with no understanding.<sup>80</sup> Against Manichean criticism of the patriarchs, he notes the example of Christ forgiving the adulterous woman and calling her to repentance and argues that God could do the same for the patriarchs.<sup>81</sup> In his treatment of the Sermon on the Mount, he brings the pericope to bear on the question of an adulterous partner being reconciled to their spouse, claiming “it would not be a bad thing for a husband to be reconciled to such a woman as that to whom, when nobody had dared to stone her, the Lord said, ‘Go, and sin no more.’”<sup>82</sup> In his lectures on John, he includes the story and deals with it as Scripture<sup>83</sup> and in his exposition of the Psalms he cites it as an illustration of Ps 103:6.<sup>84</sup> Augustine was aware of the textual issues with the story but believed that copyists had removed it due to fear that it would encourage adultery.<sup>85</sup>

Moving from the time of the Fathers to the present, the practice of the church today is fairly unanimous in printing this pericope in modern editions of Scripture. It is even included (albeit with brackets) in the Greek text of NA<sup>28</sup> and UBS<sup>5</sup> even though we know that it does not belong in John’s Gospel.<sup>86</sup> This is in

<sup>76</sup> *Apology of Rufinus* 1.22(a) (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 3:446). Cf. the editor’s note on this phrase: “Possibly a kind of paraphrase of our Lord’s words to the woman taken in adultery.”

<sup>77</sup> *Apology of Rufinus* 1.44 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 3:459).

<sup>78</sup> *Against the Pelagians* 2.6 (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 6:467, 469).

<sup>79</sup> *Sermon 62 (On the Passion 11.4)* (NPNF<sup>2</sup> 12:174–175).

<sup>80</sup> *Reply to Faustus the Manichean* 22.25 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 4:282).

<sup>81</sup> *Reply to Faustus the Manichean* 33.1 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 4:341).

<sup>82</sup> *Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount* 16.43 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 6:19).

<sup>83</sup> *Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John* 33.3–8 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 7:197–200).

<sup>84</sup> *Expositions on the Book of Psalms* 103.9 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 8:506).

<sup>85</sup> *On Adulterous Marriages* 2.6. I owe this last reference to Beasley-Murray, *John*, 143–44, and follow his summary. The English translation of the title of the work follows that given on Augnet.org.

<sup>86</sup> John Polhill may have made a similar point about the meaning of bracketed material in general.

striking contrast to prior publishing policy in the history of these editions of the Greek NT, which placed it in brackets in a footnote (see, e.g., NA<sup>19</sup>) or in brackets as an appendix to John's Gospel (see, e.g., UBS<sup>4</sup>).<sup>87</sup>

Not only publishing policy, but pulpit policy and the personal policy of individual Christians have affirmed the scriptural status of the story. Many pastors preach on the text and many Christians have read the account (at some point or another) as part of their devotional time. In other words, the contemporary church in general has certainly come to view and use this text as Scripture. And acceptance of its usage appears to be increasing even in modern critical circles as judged by the placement of the text in both English and Greek editions of the NT.

Much could also be said about the perceived spiritual power of the story. Many believers have heard in these words of Jesus an assurance that they are not condemned as well as a command to repentance. The story appears to have the spiritual power that accompanies Scripture.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Given the fact that the text seems to meet these criteria for inspiration so well, there is at least the *possibility*<sup>88</sup> that it constitutes inspired Scripture and should be treated as such in the devotional, doctrinal, and doxological life of the church. If the story is in fact inspired Scripture, the situation would be analogous to a scribe copying out one of the Gospels and deciding to insert one of the psalms between two of the chapters. Future textual critics would be aware of the addition, but that fact alone would not rule out the possibility of the psalm being received and used as Scripture. Indeed, this would be a case of an inspired text inserted into an inspired text. Applying this type of reasoning to the pericope of the woman caught in adultery, we may say that just because the story does not belong in John's Gospel does not necessarily mean that it does not belong in the Bible. If the pericope of the woman caught in adultery is an inspired text that has been inserted into an in-

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<sup>87</sup> The SBL Greek NT, however, has continued the policy of excluding it from the main body of the text, relegating it to a footnote.

<sup>88</sup> One might spin some of the factors listed above in a different way, however. One could argue that the account was not written early so the text fails the test of antiquity. One could argue that the text was not used extensively in the first few centuries of the church and, therefore, fails the test of usage. Given these alternatives which constitute areas for further discussion, we have cautiously used the language of *possibility* here. The main purpose of this paper is to present a possible perspective and a methodology rather than to render a final verdict on the status of this story. A thin line sometimes exists in our ability to recognize canonicity. For example, the church held doubts about the canonicity of books like Revelation for centuries after they were written. While the church eventually unanimously recognized the book of Revelation as belonging among the canonical books, it is entirely possible that the pericope of the woman caught in adultery falls outside those boundaries. If it is not an inspired text, the evidence presented here would suggest that it falls just on the other side of that sometimes thin line of canonicity. But whatever answer is returned on this question, the methodology presented here is correct. We must engage the question of the canonicity of this text by applying the criteria of canonicity rather than arguing at the level of historicity alone.

spired text, then despite the text-critical issues surrounding it,<sup>89</sup> the church may legitimately receive it and use it as sacred Scripture.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. incidentally Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 417.

<sup>90</sup> Thanks to John Polhill, Elijah Hixson, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on initial drafts of this paper.