

**ADDENDUM TO
CHAPTER VIII
WHAT DID JESUS WRITE
ACCORDING TO JOHN 8:6b**

J. H. Bernard, J. H. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*. ICC. Edited by A. H. Mc Neile. 2 volumes. 1928. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark.

THE “PERICOPE DE ADULTERA”

(vii. 53–viii. 11)

[pages 715–717, 720]

THE section (περικοπή) of the Fourth Gospel which contains this incident is contained in many late manuscripts and versions, but it cannot be regarded as Johannine or as part of the Gospel text.

It is not found in any of the early Greek uncials, with the single exception of Codex Bezae (D), being omitted without comment in **ⲚBNTWΘ**. L and Δ omit it, while leaving a blank space where it might be inserted, thus indicating that their scribes deliberately rejected it as part of the Johannine text. A and C are defective at this point, but neither could have contained the section, as the missing leaves would not have had room for it.

The section is omitted also in important cursives, e.g. 22, 33, 565 (in which minuscule there is a note that the scribe knew of its existence). The Ferrar cursives, i.e. *fam.* 13, do not give it in Jn., but place the section after Lk. 21³⁸, where it would be, indeed, in better agreement with the context than before Jn. 8¹². Cursives I, 1582, and some American MSS. place the section at the *end* of the Fourth Gospel. Cursive 225 places it after Jn. 7³⁸.

The Old Syriac vss. (whether in Tatian's *Diatessaron*, Syr. sin., or Syr. cur.) betray no knowledge of the passage, nor is it contained in the best MSS. of the Peshitta. In like manner the Coptic vss. omit it, e.g. the fourth century Coptic Q. . . . Some of the O.L. MSS are also without it, e.g. *af1* q*.

Even more significant is the absence of any comment on the section by Greek commentators for a thousand years after Christ, including Origen, Chrysostom. and Nonnus (in his metrical paraphrase), who deal with the Gospel verse by verse. The earliest Greek writer (Euthymius Zigabenus or Zygadenus) who comments on it lived about 1118, and even he says that the accurate copies of the Gospel do not contain it.

Further, the evidence of vocabulary and style is conclusive against the Johannine authorship of the section. The notes which follow demonstrate this sufficiently. Nor in its traditional place does it harmonise with the context. It interrupts the sequence of 7⁵³ and 8^{12 f.}; while 7⁵³ is not in harmony with what goes before, and has no connexion with 8^{12 f.}.

The early Greek evidence in favour of the medieval view that the section is an authentic part of the Fourth Gospel reduces itself to the witness of Codex Bezae (D), a manuscript with many other Western interpolations. The section is found in the great mass of later uncials and cursives, whatever be the reason of this intrusion into the more ancient text. To be borne in mind, however, is the significant fact that in many of the later MSS. which contain it, the *Pericope de adultera* is marked with an obelus (e.g. S5) or an asterisk (e.g. EMA).

The Latin evidence in its favour is considerable. The section

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appears in several O.L. texts, e.g. *b e* (sæc. v.) and *ff*₂ (sæc. vii.), as well as in Jerome's Vulgate. Jerome says expressly "in multis graecis et latinis codicibus inuenitur de adultera," etc. (*adv. Pelag.* ii. 17). Augustine (*de conj. adult.* ii. 6) accounts for its omission from some texts, by hinting that the words of Jesus which it records might seem too lenient.

The section is found also in some late Syriac and Coptic texts, while omitted in the earlier and better versions.

These facts show that the authorities on the side of the *Pericope* are almost wholly Western, and do not become numerous in any language until after the acceptance by Jerome of the section as Johannine. Jerome seems to have followed here some Greek MSS.

not now extant. This evidence is, however, wholly insufficient to justify the inclusion of the narrative in the Fourth Gospel. The ignoring of it by the early Greek MSS., vss., and commentators is thus left unexplained.

Nevertheless, the story of the adulteress seems to be an authentic fragment of early tradition as to the sayings and actions of Jesus. The story is mentioned (although not referred to the Fourth Gospel) in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ii. 24), a passage which goes back to the fourth century or perhaps even to the third. It must have been current as a tradition in the third century at any rate. Eusebius probably refers to it when he says of Papias that "he relates another story of a woman who was accused of many sins before the Lord which is contained in the Gospel according to the Hebrews" (Eus. *H.E.* iii. 39). Whether Papias got the story from the extra-canonical "Gospel according to the Hebrews," or from some other source, is not certain. But that the *Pericope de adultera* is the story which Papias told has been accepted by many critics; and, accordingly, in Light-foot's *Apostolic Fathers* the passage [Jn.] vii. 53-viii. 11 is printed as one of the surviving fragments of Papias, bishop of Hierapolis.

This is highly probable, but is not certain. All we can assert with confidence is that the passage is very like the Synoptic stories about Jesus; while its tenderness and gravity commend it as faithfully representing what Jesus said and did when a woman who had sinned unchastely was brought before Him.

No reason for the ready acceptance in the West of the story as evangelical, and of its incorporation in the Latin Gospels as early as the fourth century, can be assigned with certainty. It is perhaps significant that in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ii. 24), where we find the narrative for the first time, it is cited as a lesson to bishops who are inclined to be too severe to penitents. Now writers like Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian, who discuss at length the problems of discipline for adultery, never mention this case. Like the rest of the Church, East and West, in the second and third centuries, they held that punishment for fornication ought to be very severe, inasmuch as it seemed essential to mark the divergence of Christian ethics from heathen ethics on this point. But by the time we reach the

fourth century, ecclesiastical discipline began to be relaxed and to be less austere; and a story which had been formerly thought dangerous because of its apparent leniency would naturally be appealed to by canonists and divines as indicating the tenderness with which our Lord Himself rebuked sins of the flesh. It was but a short step from quoting the story as edifying to treating it as suitable for reading in Church. It would thus get into lectionaries, and in the Greek Menology it is the lection for St. Pelagia's day. From its insertion in Evangelistaria, it readily crept into Gospel texts, from which Jerome did not feel it

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practical to expel it. Perhaps thus, or somewhat thus, its presence in the *textus receptus* of the Fourth Gospel is to be explained.

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κατηγορεῖν, So DEGHMS, but KUGA *fam.* 13 have ἔγραφεν. κατηγορεῖν does not occur again in N.T., but appears several times

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in LXX, often meaning "to register," a sense also found in papyri. It indicates a record or register of something blameworthy in Job 13²⁶, I Esdr. 2¹⁶, Eccles 48¹⁰; and this meaning is accepted in some ancient comments, both here and at v. 8.

In a short recension of the story found in an Armenian MS. of the Gospels of A.D. 989, we have: "He Himself, bowing His head, was writing with His finger on the earth, to declare their sins; and they were seeing their several sins on the stones." And again after εἰς τὴν γῆν in v. 8, U and some cursives add ἕνος ἑκάστου αὐτῶν τᾶς ἀμαρτίας, as if Jesus were writing down the names and sins of the several accusers. Jerome has the same tradition: "Jesus inclinans digito scribebat in terra, eorum, uidelicet qui accusabant et omnium peccata mortalium, secundum quod scriptum est in propheta *Relinquentes autem te in terra scribentur*" (*adv. Pelagium* ii 17, citing Jer 17¹³).

There is, however, no evidence that Jesus was writing anything by way of record. That He was able to write may be assumed,

although in no other place in the N.T. is He said to have written anything. But it is probable that on this occasion He was only scribbling with His finger on the ground, a mechanical action which would suggest only an unwillingness to speak on the subject brought before him, and preoccupation with His own thoughts.

If, however, the meaning of register for κατέγραφευ is to be pressed, the emphasis must be placed on κατέγραφευ εἰς τὴν γῆν: "He began to register the accusation *in the dust*," as if He would have no permanent record.

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καὶ πάλιν κατακύψας ἔγραφευ εἰς τὴν γῆν. Jesus again indicates His unwillingness to discuss the matter with the Pharisees. He begins to scribble on the dust for a second time.

τῷ δακτύλῳ is inserted here after κατακύψας by D 28, 74, 1071 *ff*²; but om. *fam* 13. As at v. 6, *fam*. 13 support ἔγραφευ for κατηγορεῖν (so D 28, 31)

**Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i-xii)*.
Anchor Bible 29. 1966. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.**

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Problems of Authorship and of Canonicity

These problems must be treated as a series of distinct questions. The first question is whether the story of the adulteress was part of the original Gospel according to John or whether it was inserted at a later period. The answer to this question is clearly that it was a later insertion. This passage is not found in any of the important early Greek textual witnesses of Eastern provenance (e.g., in neither Bodmer papyrus); nor is it found in the OS or the Coptic. There are no comments on this passage by the Greek writers on John of the 1st Christian millennium, and it is only from ca. 900 that it begins to appear in the standard Greek text. The evidence for the passage as Scripture in the early centuries is confined to the Western Church. It appeals in some OL texts of the Gospels. Ambrose and Augustine wanted it read as part of the Gospel, and Jerome included it in the

Vulgate. It appears in the 5th-century Greco-Latin Codex Bezae.

However, a good case can be argued that the story had its origins in the East and is truly ancient (see Schilling, *an. cit.*) Eusebius (*Hist.* III 39:17; (GCS 9¹: 292) says, “Papins relates another story of a woman who was accused of many sins before the Lord, which is contained in the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*.” If this is the same story as that of the adulteress, the reference would point to early Palestinian origins; but we cannot be certain that our story is the one meant. The 3rd-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* II 24:6; Funk ed., I, 93) gives a clear reference to the story of the adulteress and uses it as a presumably well-known example of our Lord’s gentleness; this work is of Syrian origin, and the reference means that this story was known (but not necessarily as Scripture) in 2nd-century Syria. From the standpoint of internal criticism, the story is quite plausible and quite like some of the other gospel stories of attempts to trap Jesus (Luke xx 20, 27). There is nothing in the story itself or its language that would forbid us to think of it as an early story concerning Jesus. Becker argues strongly for this thesis.

If the story of the adulteress was an ancient story about Jesus, why did it not immediately become part of the accepted Gospels? Riesenfeld has given the most plausible explanation of the delay in the acceptance of this story. The ease with which Jesus forgave the adulteress was hard to reconcile with the stern penitential discipline in vogue in the early Church. It was only when a more liberal penitential practice was firmly established that this story received wide acceptance. (Riesenfeld traces its liturgical acceptance to the 5th century as a reading for the feast of St. Pelagia.)

The *second* question is whether or not the story is of Johannine origin. The fact that the story was added to the Gospel only at a later period does not rule out the possibility that we are dealing with a stray narrative composed in Johannine circles. The Greek text of the story shows a number of

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variant readings (stemming from the fact that it was not fully accepted at first), but in general the style is not Johannine either in vocabulary or grammar. Stylistically, the story is more Lucan than

Johannine.

Nor is the manuscript evidence unanimous in associating the story with John. One important group of witnesses places the story after Luke xxi 38, a localization which would be far more appropriate than the present position of the story in John, where it breaks up the sequence of the discourses at Tabernacles.

If the story was not of Johannine origin and is really out of place, what prompted its localization after John vii 52? (Actually, a few witnesses place it elsewhere in John: after vii 36 or at the end of the Gospel.) There are several views. Miss Guilding, pp. 110-12, 2141, accounts for the situation of the passage both in John and in Luke on the basis of her lectionary cycle theory. Schilling, p. 97ff., insisting on the parallels with the Susanna story, draws attention to echoes of Daniel in John, and thus makes the Daniel motif a guiding factor to the introduction of the story of the adulteress into John. A more certain explanation for the localization of the story in the general context of John vii and viii can be found in the fact that it illustrates certain statements of Jesus in those chapters, for example, viii 15, "I pass judgment on no one"; viii 46, "Can any of you convict me of sin?" Darrett, p. 1³, who thinks that the key to the story lies in the unworthiness of the accusers and the witnesses, points out that the theme of admissibility of evidence comes up in the immediate context of vii 51 and viii 13. Hoskyns, p. 571, hits on a truth when he says that, while the story may be textually out of place, from a theological viewpoint it fits into the theme of judgment in ch. viii.

The *third* question is whether the story is canonical or not. For some this question will have already been answered above, since in their view the fact that the story is a later addition to the Gospel and is not of Johannine origin 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. Thus, in the Roman Catholic Church the criterion of canonicity is acceptance into the Vulgate, for the Church has used the Vulgate as its Bible for centuries. The story of the adulteress was accepted by Jerome, and so Catholics regard it as canonical. It also found its way into the received text of the Byzantine Church, and ultimately into the King James Bible. And so the majority of the

non-Roman Christians also accept the story as Scripture.

The Meaning of the Story

No apology is needed for this once independent story which has found its way into the Fourth Gospel and some manuscripts of Luke, for in quality and beauty it is worthy of either localization. Its succinct expression of the mercy of Jesus is as delicate as anything in Luke; its portrayal of Jesus as the serene judge has all the majesty that we would expect of John. The moment when the sinful woman stands confronted with the sinless

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Jesus is one of exquisite drama, a drama beautifully captured in Augustine's terse Latin formula: *relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia* (*In Jo.* xxxiii 5; PL 35:1650). And the delicate balance between the justice of Jesus in not condoning the sin and his mercy in forgiving the sinner is one of the great gospel lessons..

The story prompts several questions. The most difficult concerns the reason why the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman to Jesus. Is she being brought to him for trial or just for sentence? Jeremias, *art. cit.*, suggests that she had already been judged and convicted by the Sanhedrin and that Jesus was only being asked to decide the punishment. However, the question in vs. 10, "Hasn't anyone condemned you?", seems to militate against this explanation. And it does seem unlikely that, after a regular trial by the highest court in the land, the sentence would be left to an itinerant preacher. Or if the sentence had been passed, one can scarcely believe that Jesus would be allowed to countermand it.

Others believe that the woman had not yet been tried because the Sanhedrin had lost its competence in capital cases. As we shall see in discussing xviii 31, there is a tradition that about the year 30 the Romans took away from the Sanhedrin the right of imposing capital punishment. Whether or not this story took place after the Roman action, and whether or not that tradition is correct is difficult to decide. The Fourth Gospel indicates that the Sanhedrin did not have the power of execution, but the other NT writings are not clear on this; and since the adulteress story does not seem to be Johannine in

origin, we cannot reconstruct the situation envisaged in the story by arguing from the general attitude of the Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless, *if* the Sanhedrin was not able to try and execute the woman, then the reason for bringing her to Jesus and the nature of the trap involved become clear. If he decides the case in favor of the woman and releases her, he violates the clear prescriptions of the Mosaic Law; if he orders her to be stoned, he will be in trouble with the Romans. This dilemma would be similar to that of the Roman coin in Mark xii 13–17.

Darrett, pp. 10–16, has another suggestion. He believes that, despite the Roman ban, the Pharisees and the mob were going to exercise lynch law and stone the woman. They were fired up with the zeal of Phinehas (Num xxv 6–18), a figure admired in late Judaism (I Macc ii 26). But there was a doubt of law, and for this reason they sought out Jesus. Was it necessary for the woman to have been warned about the punishment her sin would entail? We find a similar instance where a disputed legal problem is brought to Jesus in Matt xix 3. A direct answer by Jesus in the case of the woman would involve him in a legal dispute and put him in trouble with the Romans. According to Darrett (see NOTES on vss. 6, 8), Jesus avoided a direct decision by citing Exod xxiii and thus reminding the overzealous authorities that their case was not legal. Darrett's interpretation of the scene is highly ingenious but must remain an hypothesis.

As even more practical problem in the story of the adulteress concerns

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the principle enunciated by Jesus in vs. 7: "The man among you who has no sin—let him be the first to cast a stone at her." Some have used this to paint their portrait of the liberal Christ and have turned it into a maudlin justification for indifference toward sins of the flesh. However, Jesus is not saying that every magistrate must be sinless to judge others, a principle that would nullify the office of judge. He is dealing here with zealots who have taken upon themselves the indignant enforcement of the Law, and he has every right to demand that their case be thoroughly lawful and their

motives be honest. He recognizes that, although they are zealous for the word of the Law, they are not interested in the purpose of the Law, for the spiritual state of the woman is not even in question, or whether or not she is penitent. Moreover, Jesus knows that they are using her as a pawn to entrap him. Even further, if Darrett is correct, the husband of the woman may have cynically arranged to have her caught by carefully prearranging that there be witnesses to her sin, instead of seeking to win back her love. The base motives of the judges, the husband, and the witnesses are not according to the Law, and Jesus has every right to challenge their attempt to secure the woman's conviction. Understood in the light of these circumstances vs. 7 makes sense. But one should beware of attempts to make it a general norm forbidding enactments of capital punishment.