

The Relationship between Historical Veracity, Orthodoxy and Textual Canonicity

A case study on the *Pericope Adulterae* which shows why historical veracity
and orthodoxy should not validate textual canonicity.

Introduction

“Fight the good fight of faith” is a mantra begun by the apostle Paul and proudly applied now in a variety of Christian contexts. With tongue in cheek, the “good fight of faith” to withhold canonical status from John 7.53-8.11 (from here on known as *pericope adulterae* or *PA*) could be considered one of the longest and hardest conflicts within Christendom, seeing that the Roman Catholic tradition has held dearly to the Vulgate’s inclusion of it and the conservative evangelical tradition has been swayed towards its inclusion through the influential rise of King James Version. Against this sympathy for its inclusion and with the precision of a scalpel, the committees behind the various critical editions have each devoted themselves to delegitimizing the inclusion of the *PA* within John. In so doing they have helped cement the acumen of the Christian scholarship which fights against the forces of skeptical liberalism.

When determining the canonical status of the *PA* there are three issues contending for our attention: (1) What is the criteria used in determining canonical boundaries? (2) Does the internal evidence of the *PA* suggest that it is outside these boundaries? (3) Does the external evidence of the *PA* suggest that it is outside these boundaries? This paper will briefly summarize and substantiate the work done by various scholars which bar the *PA* from the canon and will also interact with the thoughtful perspectives of their detractors. In so doing this paper will argue that, while genuinely historical and orthodox, the Johannine account of the *Pericope Adulterae* ought not be given canonical status but should be relegated to the footnotes as a variant text with evident antiquity and importance.

The Problem of Canonicity

As Baum wisely highlighted in his assessment on the *PA*, the root problem of this text critical dilemma is not primarily the internal/external evidence, but rather the standard definition of canonicity.¹ If canonicity is defined by the magisterium, then the *PA* could be canonized even if it were not included in the initial text of the apostle John. The supposed mutually exclusive nature between a text's literary origin and its "canonicity" complicates this issue greatly by inserting a host of subjective determinations. Not to be outdone in subjectivity, the pneumatological approach to canonicity similarly distinguishes a text's canonicity from its literary origin, albeit in a less oppressive autocratic garb when compared to the magisterium approach. As Baum makes clear neither of these approaches to canonicity suffice because "Inspired and uninspired statements can hardly be distinguished apart from analytical observations and rational argumentation."²

However, Baum's own preference for the historical-theological model for canonicity also introduces problems about the subjectivity of canonical boundaries because it advocates for canonicity on the basis of a text's orthodoxy and historical veracity. Who is the arbiter of whether a particular text is orthodox or historical? The magisterium? The individual? In opposition to Andreas Köstenberger's plea to remove the *PA* despite its orthodoxy and historical veracity, Baum inquires, "Köstenberger seems to deny that (probably) authentic extracanonical sayings of Jesus are authoritative and have canonical status. But what can be more authoritative than the

¹ A. D. Baum, "Does the pericope adulterae (John 7:53-8:11) have canonical authority?: an interconfessional approach," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24, no. 2 (2014): 163–178.

² *Ibid.*, 171.

authentic words and deeds of Jesus?”³ Besides his very own admission that certain sayings are *extracanonical*, Baum rightly foresees that the shortcoming of such an approach to canonicity is that it presupposes an open canon and therefore deprives the church of the normative basis for its theological judgments.

Finally, in line with Köstenberger, it will be the judgment of this paper that the boundaries for canonicity should be drawn by the more objective approach of denoting whether a particular text is part of the *ausgangstext*. While hotly debated to this day, the *ausgangstext* was first defined by Gerd Mink as follows:

The *ausgangstext* is the text which the entire tradition originates from and which directly precedes the first relationship in various branches of the tradition. When textual criticism speaks about the original text, it typically means this Ausgangstext. It is only with this text that genuine text critical methods are dealing.⁴

Thus, canonicity is defined by that text which is most closely related to the autographic form of the text before variant traditions were introduced. This is the most objective way to deal with the canon of Scripture – what was the original text of the God inspired authors? On this basis we now turn to our analysis of the internal and external evidence that will bring clarity to such a judgment.

³ Ibid., 175.

⁴ “First Use of the Term Ausgangstext,” Evangelical Textual Criticism, Peter Gurry, last modified May 6, 2016, <https://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2016/05/first-use-of-term-ausgangstext.html>.

Internal Evidence

Source Theory

No other pericope in the Gospel of John is so anomalous grammatically. These internal anomalies suggest that the *PA* had a different source than John – namely Luke or a Lukan source. Therefore, the present thesis relies upon internal corroboration between the *PA* and Lukan sources. In order to substantiate the view that the *PA* is more closely aligned with the morphology and syntax of Lukan material, this thesis is indebted to the source critical work done by Paffenroth, Ehrman and further substantiated by Hughes.⁵ Paffenroth masterfully defends the legitimacy of an “L source” which was different from the “Q source” and concludes that the distinct motive behind this L source was a community that, “...revered and portrayed Jesus as a powerful ethical teacher who substantiated and revealed the authority of his teaching by acts of healing.”⁶ With this working assumption that there was in fact an L source from which the *PA* in our possession was primarily derived, the internal morphology and syntax of the *PA* become less puzzling as connections are drawn to independent Lukan source material rather than that of John.⁷

In addition to the work by Paffenroth, Ehrman highlights the discovery from the Biblical commentaries on Ecclesiastes by 4th century Didymus the Blind which shed light on the source of *PA*. In his commentary Didymus recounts the *PA* by prefacing it with *ἐν τισιν εὐαγγελίοις*, thus

⁵ See Kim Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus According to L*. vol. 00147 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 155-158. Also see Bart Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” *New Testament Studies* 34, no.1 (1988): 24-44. Also see Kyle R. Hughes, “The Lukan Special Material and the Tradition History of the ‘Pericope Adulterae,’” *Novum Testamentum* 55, no. 3 (2013): 232-251.

⁶ Kim Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus According to L*. vol. 00147 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 158.

⁷ Whether this L source was oral or written is a question unsettled, but it is negligible for the discussion at hand.

setting up a controversial question about to which gospel account does he refer. If the source of the *PA* for Didymus was the fourth gospel then the proponents of its canonicity would proudly hold their earliest attestation to its inclusion. While admitting that Didymus found the *PA* in some Alexandrian copies of the Gospel of John, Ehrman observes, "...it cannot be overlooked that Didymus does not classify the story as Johannine, nor does he suggest that it is canonical Scripture."⁸ This argument from silence may not satiate those who cherish the canonicity of *PA* and its representation of a gracious Jesus.⁹ So Ehrman backs up this argument from silence by showing (1) how Didymus was forthright and consistent in his usage of the historically reliable but non-canonical *Gospel according to the Hebrews* which contains the *PA* to which he refers, and (2) how Papias and the author of the *Didiscalia* also referenced a different Lukan version of the story not similar to the contemporary Johannine account of the *PA*.¹⁰ Ehrman concludes that there were *three* accounts of the *PA* during the time of Didymus the Blind. He proposes that the Johannine account of the *PA* was likely a conflation of the two earlier non-canonical accounts (*Gospel according to the Hebrews* and the L source behind the *Didiscalia* and Papias).¹¹ Thus, Ehrman would validate the historical validity and importance of the *PA* in the gospel of John while also relegating its current form to non-canonical status.

In both Ehrman and Paffenroth there is high deference paid to a Lukan source that primarily influenced the *PA*. Hughes so helpfully summarizes these connections by saying:

⁸ Bart Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," *New Testament Studies* 34, no.1 (1988): 28.

⁹ See Baum, "Interconfessional approach," (point #5) 178.

¹⁰ Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress," 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

The evidence of PA suggests that the L material was not entirely created by Luke nor was it entirely preserved without redaction by Luke; rather, Luke has thoroughly reworked traditional material. The fact that four of the seven Lukanisms (more on these below) in PA_{EAST} are in John 8:2 suggests that Luke's editorial hand is most noticeable in what would be his introduction to the tradition he received.¹²

Lest we enter into an exclusive analysis on source theory let us analyze the morphology and syntax of the PA which substantiates the hypothetically correct L source theory.

Morphology and Syntax

For this analysis we will focus and expand upon Hughes's three most weighty corroborating Lukan features that might point us to its original source.¹³

(i) $\pi\alpha\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma$ ὁ λαός

Rather than simply relying upon this phrase itself as Hughes does, the syntactic construction of this phrase suggests even more damning evidence against the inclusion of the PA in the Johannine account. The $\pi\alpha\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma$ + nominative noun construction found in John 8.2 is rare in the Gospel of John. Only one other time in the entire gospel is $\pi\alpha\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma$ placed with its accompanying plain nominative noun (John 2.10), and this usage is a direct quotation from the master of the feast. John is much more comfortable placing $\pi\alpha\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma$ next to an accompanying substantial participle in the nominative case rather than placing it next to a plain nominative case noun (3.8,

¹² Kyle R. Hughes, "The Lukan Special Material and the Tradition History of the 'Pericope Adulterae,'" *Novum Testamentum* 55, no. 3 (2013): 250. My parenthetical.

¹³ Ibid., 238-239.

3.15, 3.16, 3.20, 4.13, 6.40, 6.45, 8.34, twice in the TSKS construction of 11.26, 12.46, 16.2, 18.37, 19.12). While it does not preclude its inclusion into John's account, it certainly does not help. If one pairs this with Luke's comfortability with placing the modifying $\pi\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma$ next to a plain nominative noun, the Lukan source theory becomes more enticing. Compared to John's one usage (and that being a direct quotation) Luke uses this $\pi\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma$ + plain nominative noun construction 21 times (1.10, 1.37, 1.48, 1.65, 2.23, twice in 3.5, 3.6, 3.9, 6.19, 6.26, 7.29, 11.17, 12.30, 13.17, 13.27, 15.1, 18.43, 21.38, 23.48). It is clear that this construction finds a much more comfortable home in Lukan morphology. Whether this usage was from the hand of Luke or the influence of L source is not the primary question of this paper, but it serves to show the difficulty in placing these constructions in John. Perhaps this construction is what led Ehrman and the f^{13} mss to place the *PA* right after Luke 21.38.

(ii) Usage of postpositive $\delta\epsilon$

Hughes reports from Cadbury's work that " $\Delta\epsilon$ is Luke's favored conjunction, as he often substitutes it for $\tau\epsilon$ and $\kappa\alpha\iota$ in his redaction of Mark."¹⁴ And Wallace sees this Lukan influence as well when he denies the likelihood of this syntactic feature in John, saying, "Only here [in John] are the verses continuously connected by $\delta\epsilon$ (vv.2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9,10,11)."¹⁵ While this connection to Luke's typical conjunction usage does not mean that Luke was the source of the *PA*, it may be said that the evangelist was aware of or utilized a previous L source with a similar oral/orthographic style which was the source for *PA*.

¹⁴ Ibid., 239. Also see H.J. Cadbury, *The Style and Literary Method of Luke* (HTS 6; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920) 142-144.

¹⁵ DB. Wallace, "Reconsidering 'The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress Reconsidered,'" *New Testament Studies* 39, no.2 (1993): 291. My parenthetical.

(iii) Historical present verb usage

Perhaps the most challenging internal evidence that argues against Lukan origin is the usage of the historical present. ἄγουσιν (8.3) and λέγουσιν (8.4) are the two usages within the *PA* which find more stylistic similarities with the Gospel of John's proclivity for historical presents rather than with Luke. As Hughes notes, "Luke had a strong aversion to the historical present; of the 151 uses of the historical present in the Markan material that Luke used in his Gospel, Luke retained only one of them."¹⁶ Certainly Luke would have been dismayed by the usage of historical presents in subsequent verses and thus would have changed their syntax as he did with his corrections to Mark. Therefore, this along with the other evidence suggests that not only does the *PA* not find a home in John, but neither does it find a home in Luke's own writing as proposed by the *f*¹³ mss. It more than likely finds its home in the preceding L source which the evangelist utilized at his pleasure.

External Evidence

The internal evidence alone is enough to disqualify the *PA* from inclusion in the Johannine corpus, however the external evidence gives this controversy its death knell. The textual apparatus to the UBSGNT5 shows that this pericope was omitted from the following Greek mss: P⁶⁶, P⁷⁵, κ , B, L, N, T, W, Δ , Θ , Ψ , 0141, 33, 157, 565, 1241, 1333, and the original reading of 1424. It was also likely omitted from A and C because of the paucity of space on the manuscripts, but it is impossible to verify.

¹⁶ Hughes, "The Lukan Special Material," 242.

The UBSGNT5 also shows that this pericope was omitted from a number of other mss. It is missing from four Latin lectionary manuscripts dated between the fourth and eighth centuries. It is missing from Old Syriac mss, a Peshitta ms, and a Harclean Syriac ms between the third and seventh centuries. In some third century coptic manuscripts it has also been omitted. It has been omitted from Armenian (fifth century), Old Georgian (fifth century), and Slovanic (ninth century) mss. Along with this, the apparatus informs us that the *PA* is unknown to a number of ancient church fathers and documents such as Tatian (second century), Origen (third century), Chrysostom (early fifth century), and Cyril (fifth century). Metzger observes that “No Greek Church Father prior to Euthymius Zigabenus (twelfth century) comments on the passage, and Euthymius declares that the accurate copies of the Gospel do not contain it.”¹⁷ While it does find support in many Byzantine mss, Latin Church Fathers, and ultimately in Jerome’s Vulgate, there are copious amounts of other mss that place it with an asterisk next to its beginning in order to show their hesitancy with its inclusion. Codex 1424 is one of these hesitant ms from the ninth or tenth century which places it in the margin along with an asterisk and some ornamental (albeit unintentional) cat/rat footprints.

Along with its lack of inclusion in John, the apparatus informs the reader of varying locations of the *PA* within those ms which do contain it. Some placed it in varying locations within John 7 (225), some place it after all four gospels with some of these adding a critical note (1, 565, 1076, 1570, 1582), some place it between Luke and John (1333^s), one ms (115) places it

¹⁷ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 220.

after John 8.12, and the *f*¹³ mss place the *PA* after Luke 21.38.¹⁸ Some manuscripts even have the *PA* stitched into their ms.

“Despite the fact that *PA* does not appear in a Greek manuscript until Codex Bezae (fifth century), most scholars have maintained that much of the account does in fact go back to the historical Jesus.”¹⁹ Similarly Metzger agrees that it is an obvious piece of oral tradition in the Western church and therefore can be esteemed historically veracious.²⁰ So, while the *PA* maintains historical legitimacy and importance within the life of the church, this external evidence along with the internal evidence puts the legitimacy of the *PA* within the Johannine account on canonical life support.

Hermeneutical Implications for the Gospel of John

The vast majority of scholars can agree with Schnakenberg when he writes that the *PA* “accords perfectly with all that is certain about the figure of the ‘historical Jesus’ as it emerges from the synoptic gospels.”²¹ The *PA* does not offer astonishing character traits about Jesus that were not previously known. So while the *PA* does not threaten the historical nature of Jesus and his mission, it does threaten the narrative flow and literary context within John. While most scholars believe this pericope “breaks up Jesus’ discourse at the Feast of the Tabernacles,” there

¹⁸ Ehrman believes the *f*¹³ mss place this pericope in the correct place. See Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress.”

¹⁹ Hughes, “The Lukan Special Material,” 247.

²⁰ Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 221.

²¹ R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 2:170.

are others who advocate that without it the transition from 7.52 to 8.12 “appears rather awkward.”²²

Heil’s attempt to solidify the inclusion of the *PA* in John’s gospel account is commendable but not thoroughly convincing. Wallace’s criticism of Heil gives a balanced retort to his arguments. In reference to the quick transition from 7.52 to 8.12, Wallace says, “Although it is true that Jesus is not in the immediately preceding scene, there is no more awkwardness between 7.52 and 8.12 than between 8.20 and 8.21, for in both places ‘again’ (πάλιν) is used in a resumptive manner, picking up the exchange in the narrative between two opposing parties (the Pharisees and Jesus), though there are evident gaps in time.”²³

Perhaps the most intelligent argument for its inclusion in the Gospel of John is that it was excluded in an effort to maintain the moral prudence of Jesus. The correct reading is the one that can explain the results of all the other readings, so the moral prudence theory argues that the *PA* was removed from the earliest copies in order to protect the seemingly indulgent nature of Christ’s actions toward the adulterous woman. However, Metzger credits Hort with a clear antithesis to this idea saying, “...apart from the absence of any instance elsewhere of scribal excision of an *extensive* passage because of moral prudence, this theory fails ‘to explain why the three preliminary verses (7.53-8.2), so important as apparently descriptive of the time and place

²² For proponents of its contextual irregularity see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 220. And Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 27. For proponents of its contextual regularity J. P. Heil, “The story of Jesus and the adulteress (John 7:53-8:11) reconsidered,” *Biblica* 72, no. 2 (1991): 186.

²³ Wallace, “Reconsidering,” 294.

at which all the discourses of chapter 8 were spoken, should have been omitted with the rest’
(Hort, “Notes on Select Readings,” pp.86f.).”²⁴

After considering the internal evidence, external evidence, and the contextual evidence for the *PA* it is reasonable to conclude that, while genuinely historical and orthodox, the Johannine account of the Pericope Adulterae ought not be given canonical status but should be relegated to the footnotes as a variant text with evident antiquity and importance.

²⁴ Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 221.

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