

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

A COMMENTARY COMPARISON APPROACH
TO THE APORIA IN “*PERICOPE DE ADULTERA*”

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO
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NBST 655 THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Bible is filled with unsurpassed wisdom, but with such great wisdom comes certain difficulties within the text as well. This type of difficulty, called an *aporia*, is found in many places throughout The Gospel of John from the “idiom and poetic style” of the prologue in 1:1-18, to the origin and “Codex Sinaiticus” issues of the very last verse of the book of John (21:25).¹ In the time of 21st century relativism, readers are quick to identify these difficulties, especially in the Fourth Gospel, but “discerning readers,” through the help of scholarly work on the specific passages, can usually explain the *aporia* quite well.² This paper will attempt to examine the *aporia* known as the *Pericope De Adulterae* from John 7:53-8:11 by comparing three different scholarly commentaries to locate the best possible solution to the issues raised by this *aporia*.

A Brief Overview of an *Aporia*

In the Gospel of John there are several “literary seams” or rough transitions, called *aporias*, which suggest the material is “weaved together” from various different sources.³ The term *aporia*, seen in the New Testament Greek as ἀπορία (Strong’s #640), is found in the passage from Luke 21:25, and refers to being perplexed, or a perplexity.⁴ The word found in several other New Testament passages, such as Mark 6:20, Luke 24:4, John 13:22, use a slightly different tense, ἀπορέω (*aporeō*), but generally is referred to being confused, uncertain, or to be at a loss.⁵ In 1907 and 1908 German scholar E. Schwartz, through a set of discussions titled “*Aporien im vierten Evangelium*,” meaning *Aporias* in the Fourth Gospel, evaluated difficulties

¹ Gary M. Burge, *Interpreting the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 63-66.

² *Ibid.*, 66.

³ Colin G. Kruse, vol. 4, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 20.

⁴ Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries : Updated Edition* (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998).

⁵ *Ibid.*

in the “literary seams” of John’s Gospel, and the meaning took on the present day form.⁶ Schwartz’s findings were further expanded upon by Rudolf Bultmann, in his 1941 commentary on the Gospel of John, where he put forth several "partition theories," to help explain what he called suspect sources for John’s Gospel, something Bultmann also tried to do with Romans.⁷ There was no complete agreement among scholars with Schwartz’s conclusions. E. Ruckstuhl showed in 1951, and again in 1991, that an abundance of caution was needed when evaluating literary seams in John, when he showed the book of John was “remarkably uniform.”⁸ No matter what technical conclusion is made about the John manuscript, there are difficulties that need further explanation, which help in an overall understanding of the Fourth Gospel.

An Introduction to the *Aporia* “*Pericope de Adulterae*”

The *pericope* is unique in that most of the text itself is not a highly difficult passage in its hermeneutical application; its difficulty comes with whether to include the text itself. John 7:53-8:11 is a short story that bisects the Tabernacles discourse, but “still has theological connections with it,” about adultery and judgment that transcends time.⁹ After the leading scribes bring forward a woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus shows how we are to forgive.

"Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ...he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." ...when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones... Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."¹⁰

There are many sections of Scripture where Jesus gives great wisdom and insight into a life

⁶ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 259.

⁷ Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Westminster Press, 1971).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Burge, 65.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV). Select pieces from John 7:53-8:11. *The Holy Bible in English Standard Version (ESV)*, ESV Text Edition 2011 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

entrusted to God. Unlike many other parts of Scripture, few are as hotly debated, and contested, as the story of the “woman caught in adultery” from John 7:53-8:11, traditionally known as the *pericope adulterae*.¹¹ This *aporia* is somewhat unique in that the “manuscript evidence” is significant, and there is some rare scholarly consensus about the inclusion of the *pericope*. At this point in scholarly history, most who have studied the *pericope*, would agree that this section of John was not in the original text, and most modern day English translations place this section parenthetically, or “relegate it to a footnote.”¹² It should be noted that before any authoritative use of the *pericope* is to take place with John 7:53-8:11, it is imperative that the proper questions are asked and addressed as to the contextual nature of this passage. While all Scripture is “profitable for reproof, correction, and training,” the question of whether the story of the woman caught in adultery is Scripture is worth examination (1 Timothy 3:16). If it is not found to truly be inspired Scripture, how can it be used for reproof or correction at all?

While most scholars do agree the story of the woman caught in adultery was probably not part of the original Johannian text, they also tend to agree “the story is a truly ancient one with all the earmarks of an authentic incident from Jesus' life,” and also poses no threat to any doctrinal issues in any other parts of Scripture.¹³ The *pericope* deals with many sound principles, and begins with an examination of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day. While searching for a way to discredit Jesus, they attempt to test him. Jesus, knowing their schemes, then turns the situation around and shocks all by not condemning the woman caught in sin, but calling out the sin of those who brought her to Jesus in the first place.

This particular study will compare how three different scholarly sources, covering almost

¹¹ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006; 2006), Jn 7:53.

¹² D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introductory to the New Testament*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 273.

¹³ Frances Taylor Gench, “John 7:53-8:11,” *Interpretation* (Academic OneFile) 63, no. 4 (October 2009): 398.

one hundred years of scholarship on John, address the issues surrounding the *pericope*. First, this research will look at *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St John* by J.H. Bernard, next the *Word Biblical Commentary: John*, by George R. Beasley-Murray, and finally *John: An Introduction and Commentary* by Colin G. Kruse. In examining how these three resources discuss the *pericope*, a reader can better understand a possible overall solution to the difficulty. This in turn will aid readers and teachers how best the *pericope* should be used for “teaching and reproof.”

II. SUMMARY OF THREE COMMENTARY VIEWS

When studying the various *aporias* in the book of John it is important to seek out the work of good critical scholarly commentaries where the authors dig deeper than surface level to find the hard answers. These three commentaries were chosen with that specific concept, and each of the three come recommended by multiple sources on scholarly work in the Fourth Gospel.

A Critical and Exegetical Commentary: C. Scribner’ Sons

This commentary on John, originally published by T&T Clark and written by J.H. Bernard, was completed in the early 20th century, just before the author’s death, and takes a detailed and critical look at the *pericope* passage in John 7:53-8:11. Bernard refers to this passage in the Fourth Gospel within a section of “non-Johannine Glosses,” which includes passages such as 4:1; 6:23; 11:2, and others.¹⁴ Bernard immediately and unequivocally places the *pericope* passage outside the text of John, and does not even include a commentary on the passage within his own text after 7:52 saying “For 7:53–8:11 see the notes at the end of Vol. II.

¹⁴ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, Vol. 1&2, in *International Critical Commentary*, ed. A. H. McNeile (New York, NY: C. Scribner' Sons, 1929), xxxiii.

on the *Pericope de Adultera*.”¹⁵ The standard way of handling the *pericope* passage for most modern day translations is parenthetically, but here Bernard allocates the story to an appendix. Bernard points out, through a series of checks on the available manuscripts, that this passage just “does not appear in any of the early Greek uncials, with one single exception” in the Codex Bezae (D) dating back to circa A.D. 400.¹⁶ What is even more significant to Bernard is the “absence of any commentary for about a thousand years after Christ, including Origen, Chrysostom, and Nonnus,” who dealt with the Fourth Gospel verse by verse.¹⁷ These authors also write extensively on the problems of adultery, but never mention the *pericope* passage.¹⁸

Once it does finally appear in a commentary, around A.D. 1118 by Euthymius Zygabenus (or Zygadenus), the author states that accurate copies of the Fourth Gospel do not contain the *pericope*.¹⁹ Bernard goes on to note that the literary style does not match the surrounding material, and that it interrupts the sequence of 7:52 and that of 8:12.²⁰ With all the evidence pointing back to a single Codex, the Codex Bezae (D), which was written with many “Western interpolations,” the *pericope* began to see stronger use within the Latin context from Augustine to Jerome’s Vulgate.²¹ Once Jerome accepted the *pericope*, who seemed to have followed a Greek MSS, use became common, but remained an influence of mainly Western authorities.²²

Bernard goes on to point out that, even though this passage was not included in the original manuscripts, it does look to be an authentic fragment “of early tradition” going back to the fourth, or possibly even the third century, where it was found in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.²³

¹⁵ Ibid., 290.

¹⁶ Bernard, Vol 2, Jn 7:53-8:11, 2715.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2716.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 2717.

²³ Ibid.

Prior to his detailed exegetical study on the passage itself, Bernard concludes, “All we can assert with confidence is that the passage is very like the Synoptic stories about Jesus,” and there is no real reason for its overwhelming acceptance in the West.²⁴ The author does not go into any great detail as to how we should address this passage in modern times, whether it should be viewed as canonical or authoritative in nature, only to say it is consistent with the words of our Lord.

Word Biblical Commentary, John: Thomas Nelson

The second commentary to evaluate when looking at the *aporia* of the *Pericope de Adulterae*, is the Word Biblical Commentary written by George R. Beasley-Murray in 1999. Murray chooses to place this passage at the end of the commentary on chapter 8, thus moving in his text directly from John 7:52 to 8:12 without any break or mention of the *pericope*. Murray opens his remarks on the woman caught in adultery by offering nine points as to why this passage is not part of the original Johannine text. The author points out everything from the absence in early MSS, to it not appearing in commentaries before Zigabenus in the twelfth century, to variants in the text and the large use of *obeli* by the scribes.²⁵ Murray, much like Bernard, states, “it is clear that the story was not penned by the Fourth Evangelist, yet there is no reason to doubt its substantial truth.”²⁶ In addition to agreeing with Bernard on many issues, Murray also finds the *pericope* is better placed “with the controversy stories of Mark 11:27–12:37,” and then classifies the passages as a “controversy dialogue.”²⁷

When looking at the early church and how it used the passage, Murray explains that Augustine came to the conclusion that the passage was removed because the story “would give

²⁴ Ibid., 2716.

²⁵ George R. Beasley-Murray, vol. 36, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 145.

²⁶ Ibid., 143.

²⁷ Ibid., 145.

their wives encouragement to sin with impunity.”²⁸ This shows that Augustine was aware of the controversy surrounding the *pericope*, but no mention is made here as to whether Augustine regarded this passage as a Biblically authoritative source, written by the son of Zebedee. Murray notes that Augustine’s conclusions were “an unlikely eventuality,” but does say that some “unknown Christian did save this passage” from oblivion by writing it down.²⁹ As with Bernard, Murray does not come to any specific conclusion as to whether the *pericope* is an authoritative Scripture and he proceeds to his detailed commentary as if it were, but parenthetically.

John, An Introduction and Commentary: Tyndale

The last commentary to examine on its handling of the *pericope* passage is the Tyndale commentary, written by Colin G. Kruse, revised in 2003. At this time, almost present day, Kruse defers almost entirely on the discussion of canonicity and textual criticism to another author. Kruse does, in a very brief and short paragraph, state, this story is “very unlikely” to be part of the original Fourth Gospel, but has all the historical evidence of being an authentic story.³⁰ While this is a highly acclaimed commentary on the Fourth Gospel, Kruse at this point defers to Bruce Metzger and his very technical commentary, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, where he states, “At the close of ver. 36 manuscript 225 (copied a.d. 1192) inserts the *pericope* of the adulteress, usually found at Jn 7:53–8:11.”³¹ Kruse offers no other discussion as to the inclusion or removal of the *pericope*, and includes the commentary of the selected passage within the canonical order following 7:52 and ending prior to 8:12.

III. CONCLUSION

The *Pericope de Adulterae* is an *aporia* with strong evidence confirming its proper

²⁸ Murray, 145.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kruse, 197.

³¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994), 185.

exclusion from the pen of John the son of Zebedee. This now seems to be widely supported by modern scholarship, but few seem to offer clear solutions to the difficulty choosing not to discuss why we should include it now, and what effect its inclusion might have on inerrancy issues. The exegetical commentary itself was not closely evaluated in this research because all three commentaries tended to agree on a proper hermeneutic of John 7:58-8:11. The content of the *pericope* can be viewed in three different sections, the teacher (7:53-8:3), the trap (vv. 4-9), and the trial (10-11). In the first section we see Jesus presented as the Lord over the situation, as the knowledgeable Teacher. This is something confirmed all through the New Testament, and many places in John, such as in John 3:2. This type of teaching is commonly written about Jesus in places other than John as well (cf. Matthew 5:1 and Luke 4:20), which shows the theological backing of the *pericope* is not dependent upon itself. In the conclusion of the *pericope*, Jesus provides an answer to the woman that condemns the sin in her life, but not the person, and in turn gave her hope in a new life apart from sin. Jesus forces the Pharisees to walk away when he “exposes their misuse of the law,” and instead shows that justice should come from grace and a loving spirit, something taught throughout the New Testament, not something that is just found here in the *pericope*.³²

The *aporia* found in John 7:58-8:11, titled the *Pericope de Adulterae*, is unique among other *aporias* found in the Gospel of John. Almost all of the *aporias* in John are difficulties found with the text, its wording, or its agreements. The *pericope* is unique in that most of the text itself is not difficult in its hermeneutical application; its difficulty comes with the inclusion of the text itself. All three commentary authors noted the text was not original to the Fourth Gospel, and all three concluded the text was historical in nature, worthy of being told, but none

³² John Piper, “Neither Do I Condemn You,” *Desiring God*, March 6, 2011, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/neither-do-i-condemn-you--3> (accessed July 10, 2012).

addressed any issues of the canon or its effect on inerrancy. Similar conclusions were made by yet another credible commentary source saying, “There is little reason for doubting the event occurred,” but its “diversity of placement” around the Gospels “confirms its inauthenticity.”³³

The best possible solution to the *aporia* tends to be how publishers of the more modern day have handled the *pericope*, to note it parenthetically or with an asterisk, and then a brief explanation of its authenticity issues. This is acceptable to most readers, but hardly delves into the greater details of how this *aporia* is to be used by teachers or preachers for reproof and learning. Are educators and preachers to exclude this section from their teaching as non-canonical, or use the *pericope* as authoritative? To err on the side of caution seems to be the most reasonable conclusion to make in this particular case, but this issue is not addressed by any of the three commentaries compared in this research. The best alternative to a proper examination of John 7:53-8:11 is to show that the *pericope* is “true on the basis of other parts of Scripture, and so let this story not be the basis of our authority,” but instead to point to the authority of the Scriptures and what they teach.³⁴ By using the *pericope* passage for teaching and reproof in this manner, one can stay true to the overall Biblical canon, while still learning from an important historical passage, without altering any known doctrine.

³³ D.A. Carson, “The Gospel According to John,” in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 333.

³⁴ John Piper, “Neither Do I Condemn You”.

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