

In Defence  
of  
John 7:53–8:11



Pericope Adulteræ

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JESUS AND THE WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY



*'Inquire for the Old Paths'. Jer. 6:16.*

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BIBLE STUDENTS,  
TRACTS.

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# In Defence of John 7:53–8:11

*The Pericope Adulterae*<sup>1</sup>—an examination of the evidence for and against its authenticity

*A note to the reader: this document grew out of a fraternal discussion amongst brethren concerning the authenticity of John 7:53–8:11. It is not written in a spirit of controversy or personal point-scoring. The subject is genuinely serious—more serious, it is submitted, than is sometimes appreciated—and it deserves careful, honest treatment. What follows is an attempt to provide exactly that: a fair examination of the arguments on both sides, drawing on manuscript evidence, the testimony of early church fathers, classical biblical commentaries, and the writings of Pastor Russell. The aim throughout is not to win an argument but to follow the evidence where it leads.*

## I. INTRODUCTION—WHY THE MATTER IS SERIOUS

The question of whether John 7:53–8:11 is genuine Scripture is not a mere academic curiosity. It touches upon something of considerable spiritual weight: the integrity of the received Word of God, the character of the Lord Jesus Christ as Scripture consistently portrays him, and the responsibility that rests upon every student of the Bible before dismissing any portion of the sacred text.

Twelve verses are at issue. They record one of the most memorable encounters in the Gospel narrative—a woman accused of adultery, brought before the Lord by those who sought to entrap him, and the masterful response of Christ that convicted her accusers and sent them away one by one. The passage closes with words that have echoed through the centuries: *‘Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.’*

Those who dismiss these verses do so primarily on the grounds that they are absent from certain early manuscripts. That is a legitimate textual observation and deserves honest engagement. However, it will be argued here that this observation, taken alone, is insufficient grounds for dismissal—and that the full weight of evidence, properly assessed, supports the passage as authentic and inspired Scripture. Certainly not an easy subject, and one that demands care on all sides.

## 2. A WORD OF CAUTION AGAINST HASTY JUDGEMENT

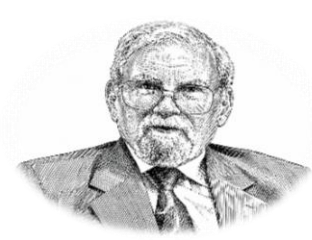
It has been suggested in some quarters that John 7:53–8:11 may be influenced by the Adversary—that is, not merely a later scribal addition but something of diabolical rather than divine origin. This is a very serious claim, and it is worth pausing on it before proceeding further.

*To cut out twelve verses of what may be inspired Scripture and refer to them as potentially of the Adversary—one should be absolutely certain that those verses are not genuine; otherwise, it is effectively the case that a part of inspired Holy Scripture—a product of the Holy Spirit—is being attributed to the Wicked One. This is a very serious matter indeed. Our Lord warned those who attributed the works of the Holy Spirit to Beelzebub that they were in danger of the unpardonable sin (Matthew 12:31–32). The same principle applies, with equal force, to the written Word. To describe these verses as spurious is one thing—that is a textual judgement, and it can be debated. To suggest they are diabolically inspired is quite another, and requires a standard of proof that the absence of a passage from two manuscripts, however ancient, cannot begin to meet—particularly when patristic testimony, the Latin tradition, internal evidence, and the witness of multiple scholars across many centuries all point in the opposite direction.*

Those who make this claim bear a correspondingly heavy burden of proof—one that the evidence presented in this document shows has not been discharged.

<sup>1</sup> *Pericope Adulterae*: Latin, ‘the passage of the adulteress.’ From Greek *περικοπή* (*perikopē*), ‘a section of text’ (Liddell-Scott, s.v.), and Latin *adulterae*, genitive of *adultera*, ‘adulteress’ (Lewis and Short, s.v.).

A NOTE ON THE PRINCIPAL OBJECTOR'S HANDLING OF GREEK AND MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE



The objections examined in Section 7 of this document are drawn primarily from Frank Shallieu's *New Testament Studies*. Shallieu was a careful and serious student of the Bible, widely respected within the Bible Student movement, and his objections deserve—and receive—a full and honest response. However, it is relevant to the reader's assessment of those objections to note that Shallieu's own handling of Greek and manuscript evidence elsewhere in his published work exhibits the very inconsistency he implicitly charges against defenders of the *pericope*. Two examples from his work *The Keys of Revelation* illustrate this.

In his commentary on Revelation 20:7 (*The Keys of Revelation*, pp. 521–522), Shallieu argues that the Sinaitic manuscript preserves a reading that places Satan's loosing within the framework of the Millennium rather than at its very end. The argument rests on the presence of the suffix *-se* (σε) appended to the verb *telesthē* (τελεσθῆ)—the aorist passive subjunctive of *teleō*, 'to end'—producing what Shallieu reads as *telesthēse*, which he interprets as meaning 'toward completion' or 'nearing its end' rather than 'when the thousand years are expired.' Several serious problems attend this argument.

Firstly, the suffix *-se/-ze/-de* in Greek is a locative directional suffix that in classical and Koine Greek attaches exclusively to place nouns and place adverbs—words like *allōse* (to another place), *oikade* (homeward), or *Athēnaze* (to Athens). It is documented as such in the standard reference grammar, Herbert Weir Smyth's *Greek Grammar* (Harvard University Press, 1920), §341–342. There is no example in classical Greek, Koine Greek, or the Greek of the New Testament period of this suffix being appended to a verbal ending to modify its aspect or temporal meaning. Shallieu's application of the suffix to a verb form is, in grammatical terms, without precedent—the extension of a rule governing adverbs of place to a category of words to which it does not apply.

Secondly, the reading itself is of highly doubtful textual standing. Shallieu himself acknowledges (*The Keys of Revelation*, p. 521) that the suffix in Sinaiticus was 'added by a later correctionist' and that dots above the letters were subsequently placed there by that same or another corrector—the standard Sinaitic convention for cancellation or query. In other words, the reading was not in the original hand of Sinaiticus; it was added by a corrector; and that addition was then itself queried. It appears in no other Greek manuscript of Revelation. The entire remaining manuscript tradition reads the plain *telesthē* without the suffix. A doctrinal conclusion about the chronology of the Millennium rests, on this analysis, on a corrector's addition that the manuscript's own correcting tradition subsequently marked as doubtful, written in a suffix usage unattested anywhere else in the Greek language.

Thirdly, there is a still more fundamental problem with the reading than the misapplication of the suffix: the verb form from which Shallieu works is not the verb form that actually appears in Revelation 20:7. The verb present in every manuscript of Revelation at this verse is *telesthē* (τελεσθῆ)—the aorist passive subjunctive, third person singular, of *teleō*. The form *telesthēse* (τελέσθησε), which Shallieu's argument requires, is a morphologically distinct form (i.e., a different verb form)—the aorist passive indicative—and it does not appear in the text. What Shallieu identifies as a corrector's two-letter addition producing a directional suffix is, on the standard reading of the manuscript, simply part of the uncial spelling of *telesthē* itself. In other words, the suffix may not be an addition at all; it may be a misidentification of letters that belong to the standard verb form. The entire argument rests on a misreading of the manuscript at the most basic level—the identification of which letters are part of the original text and which are not.

Fourthly, the argument contains an additional grammatical error that is worth identifying precisely. In describing the verbal construction of Revelation 20:7, Shallieu refers to the verb as being in the ‘subjunctive<sup>2</sup> future’—as though ‘future’ were a tense of the subjunctive mood. This is not a Greek grammatical category. A.T. Robertson, whose *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Broadman Press, 1934, pp. 848–849) remains the standard reference work on New Testament Greek, is explicit that the subjunctive mood in Greek exists in the present and aorist tenses only—it has no future tense. The *unfolding Word Greek Grammar*<sup>3</sup> states this directly: ‘Tense in the subjunctive mood refers to aspect, not time. Verbs in the subjunctive mood have no reference to time—past, present, or future.’ What is conventionally described as a ‘future’ temporal clause introduced by *hotan* uses the aorist subjunctive, which expresses aspect (completed action) rather than future tense. Shallieu’s conflation of mood and tense—describing the aorist subjunctive as a ‘subjunctive future’—reflects a confusion of two distinct grammatical categories and introduces an inaccuracy at the foundation of his analysis.

Fifthly—and this is the point of direct relevance to the *pericope* discussion—Shallieu’s treatment of Sinaiticus across his commentary on Revelation 20 is methodologically inconsistent. At verse 4 (*The Keys of Revelation*, pp. 514–515), where Sinaiticus reads ‘a thousand years’ rather than ‘the thousand years’, Shallieu concludes straightforwardly that Sinaiticus has ‘apparently incorrectly transcribed’ the expression, and he summons other manuscript witnesses to establish the correct reading. This is sound textual method: the lone Sinaitic reading is weighed against the broader tradition and found wanting. At verse 7, however, a disputed corrector’s mark in the same manuscript—one queried by the manuscript’s own correcting tradition and not found in any other witness—is elevated to the status of a key to the verse’s meaning, overriding the unanimous reading of every other manuscript in existence.

The textual situation at Revelation 20:7 makes this inconsistency still sharper. H. C. Hoskier—the scholar who produced the most exhaustive collation of Revelation manuscripts ever undertaken, spending over three decades examining all available witnesses and publishing his conclusions in two volumes as *Concerning the Text of the Apocalypse* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1929)—concluded that Revelation 20:7 exhibits no meaningful textual variation across the manuscript tradition. The Sinaitic, Vatican, and Textus Receptus traditions all read *telesthē* (τελεσθῆ) identically at this verse. Hoskier is no simple ally of the Received Text; he was a rigorous and independent collator who identified genuine variants elsewhere with great precision. His finding of stability at this verse is not the conclusion of a partisan but of the field’s foremost specialist. Furthermore, the official scholarly edition of Codex Sinaiticus—available through the Codex Sinaiticus Project, the collaborative undertaking of the British Library, Leipzig University Library, the National Library of Russia, and St Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai—renders the English translation of Revelation 20:7 consistently with every other scholarly translation: ‘when the thousand years are finished.’<sup>4</sup> The very manuscript cited in support of the variant reading does not, on the scholarly edition produced by those who have examined it most carefully, support that reading.

<sup>2</sup> For readers unfamiliar with Greek grammatical terminology: *aorist*—a Greek tense denoting a completed action viewed as a whole (‘was completed’, ‘was finished’); *subjunctive*—a grammatical mood expressing contingency or future reference, used in Greek temporal clauses introduced by conjunctions such as *hotan* (‘when/whenever’); *indicative*—the mood of straightforward factual statement; *aorist passive subjunctive*—combining completed aspect, passive voice, and subjunctive mood, the standard verb form in Revelation 20:7; *aorist passive indicative*—the same verb as a straightforward past statement of fact rather than a future contingent clause; *uncial*—a style of ancient manuscript handwriting using large separate capital letters, standard in early Greek biblical manuscripts such as Codex Sinaiticus. See further Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, 3rd ed. (Zondervan, 2009); Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> online edition, [ugg.readthedocs.io](http://ugg.readthedocs.io), chapter on the Subjunctive Mood

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/manuscript.aspx?\\_VIEWSTATEGENERATOR=01FB804F&book=59&chapter=20&lid=en&side=r&verse=7&zoomSlider=0](https://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/manuscript.aspx?_VIEWSTATEGENERATOR=01FB804F&book=59&chapter=20&lid=en&side=r&verse=7&zoomSlider=0)

Sixthly, it is worth observing that the proposed reading of Revelation 20:7 appears to have been constructed to support a pre-existing doctrinal conclusion rather than arrived at by following the evidence of the text. The doctrinal stakes are identifiable: if Satan is released only after the thousand years are fully completed, certain chronological frameworks become more difficult to maintain. This is a legitimate doctrinal concern—but it is a reason to revisit the doctrinal framework in the light of the text, not a reason to find in the text a reading that the grammar and the entire manuscript tradition do not support. The principle that doctrine must be tested against Scripture, rather than Scripture wrested to serve doctrine, is one that the Bible Student tradition has consistently affirmed. That principle applies with equal force here. It is also worth noting that Pastor Russell, whose chronological framework is the very one at issue, did not himself regard the standard rendering of Revelation 20:7 as creating any difficulty. When asked directly whether Christ’s handing over of the Kingdom to the Father would occur before or after the Little Season, Russell answered without hesitation: ‘We answer that it will be before. When the thousand years are finished Christ will deliver the kingdom up to the Father.’—(Q423:1, 1911.) In a separate answer addressing the sequence of Satan’s destruction and the abolition of death, Russell stated equally plainly that ‘in the close of that reign he will be loosed for a little season.’ (Q827:2.) Both answers place Satan’s loosing at the termination of the Millennial reign, not within it—a position entirely consistent with the plain reading of the text, ‘when the thousand years are expired’, and inconsistent with the alternative reading proposed in *The Keys of Revelation*. If the standard rendering presented a problem for Russell’s own chronology, he gave no indication of it; on the contrary, he appears to have regarded it as the natural and untroubled reading of the verse.

#### IN PLAIN TERMS—A SUMMARY FOR THE NON-SPECIALIST READER

The Greek argument advanced in *The Keys of Revelation* regarding Revelation 20:7 fails on every level that can be checked:

- The Greek verb form the argument requires (*telesthēse*) is not the form actually present in Revelation 20:7. Every manuscript reads *telesthē*—a different and standard form.
- The suffix (*-se*) said to mean ‘towards completion’ does not function that way when attached to a verb in any Greek grammar ever written.
- The manuscript evidence for the variant rests on a corrector’s addition in Sinaiticus that was subsequently dotted for cancellation by the manuscript’s own correcting tradition—and appears in no other manuscript on earth.
- The terminology ‘subjunctive future’ used to describe the Greek construction does not exist as a grammatical category in Greek.
- The official scholarly edition of Codex Sinaiticus itself translates the verse in the standard way: ‘when the thousand years are finished.’
- Hoskier’s exhaustive collation of all Revelation manuscripts found no meaningful variant at this verse.
- Pastor Russell himself accepted the standard reading without difficulty and answered related questions on its basis without suggesting any problem with the chronology.

The same method that finds this variant reading in Revelation is the method applied to John 7:53–8:11. The reader is entitled to weigh that fact.

The contrast with Shallieu’s treatment of John 7:53–8:11 is direct. There, the absence of the passage from Sinaiticus and Vaticanus—two manuscripts of demonstrably regional provenance, concentrated in Egypt, and each with documented patterns of omission error—is treated as weighty grounds for questioning twelve verses supported by hundreds of manuscripts, centuries of patristic witness, and the continuous liturgical use of the Eastern church. Here, a dotted corrector’s mark in one manuscript, working from what may be a misidentification of the standard verb form, unattested in any other witness, and contradicted by Hoskier’s comprehensive collation, is treated as the basis for a significant chronological doctrine.

This is not raised in order to impugn Shallieu’s sincerity or to dismiss his scholarship wholesale. It is raised because intellectual consistency is a scholarly virtue, and because the reader is entitled to know that the standard of manuscript evaluation Shallieu applies when Sinaiticus supports his position is not the standard he applies when Sinaiticus does not. A witness treated as unreliable when it preserves a passage, but as authoritative when a corrector’s addition supports a doctrine, is being used as a resource rather than evaluated as evidence. That is a methodological consideration the reader should bear in mind when weighing the objections that follow. In short: if a dotted corrector’s mark in Sinaiticus can override the unanimous manuscript tradition in Revelation 20:7, but the unanimous Antiochian manuscript tradition can be dismissed in John 7:53–8:11 because Sinaiticus omits the passage, the standard of evidence is not consistent—and that inconsistency is directly relevant to every objection examined in Section 7 of this document.

### 3. THE PASSAGE ITSELF

*Jesus went unto the mount of Olives. And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them. And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, they say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, **He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.** And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, **Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?** She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, **Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.***

**John 7:53–8:11 (KJV)**

It is worth reading this passage carefully before engaging with the arguments. Does it read like a forgery? Does it serve any obvious theological agenda? Does it promote any known heresy or doctrinal error? These are questions worth keeping in mind throughout.



## 4. THE MANUSCRIPT QUESTION IN PERSPECTIVE

### THE TWO STREAMS OF MANUSCRIPT TRANSMISSION

Before examining the individual manuscripts, it will help the reader considerably to understand that the entire Greek New Testament manuscript tradition divides into **two principal geographical and textual streams**—and that the question of the *Pericope Adulterae*'s authenticity maps directly onto this division.

The first is the **Alexandrian stream**—manuscripts originating in or closely associated with Alexandria in Egypt. Its primary representatives are Codex Sinaiticus<sup>5</sup> (Ⲁ), Codex Vaticanus<sup>6</sup> (B), and the early papyri P66<sup>7</sup> and P75<sup>8</sup>. This stream is geographically concentrated: its manuscripts come from one region, reflecting the textual traditions of *the Egyptian church*. F. H. A. Scrivener<sup>9</sup>, in *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament* (1883), was one of the first to characterise this as a distinct regional stream, noting its **divergence from the mainstream of Greek transmission**. B. H. Streeter<sup>10</sup> (Burnett Hillman Streeter, 1874–1937), in *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (Macmillan, 1924, pp. 26–76), further established that the Alexandrian manuscripts represent a geographically localised text-type, not a universally distributed one. Kurt Aland<sup>11</sup> and Barbara Aland<sup>12</sup>, in *The Text of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 2nd ed. 1989, pp. 48–71)—the standard modern reference on manuscript families—confirm the Alexandrian text-type as **one of the two dominant streams**, alongside the Byzantine.

The second is the **Antiochian stream**—also called the Syrian, Byzantine, or **Majority Text stream**—*associated with Antioch* in Syria and **transmitted through the Greek-speaking churches** of Asia Minor, Greece, Constantinople, and the broader Eastern Mediterranean. This is by far the larger stream: of the over 5,000 surviving Greek New Testament manuscripts, 90% or more belong to this tradition. Scrivener identified the Syrian or Antiochian text as the mainstream of Greek transmission (*ibid.*), and Streeter confirmed that it represents the textual inheritance of the church at large, as distinct from the Egyptian local tradition. Aland and Aland similarly identify the Byzantine text-type as the dominant tradition by sheer numerical and geographical weight (*The Text of the New Testament*, pp. 59–64).

These two names—the **Alexandrian stream** and the **Antiochian stream**—are descriptive geographical designations with solid scholarly grounding, and they will be used throughout this document. Their relevance to the *Pericope Adulterae* is immediate and decisive: the passage is *absent* from the **Alexandrian stream** and *present* in the **Antiochian stream** overwhelmingly. That single fact, properly understood, is the heart of the manuscript argument.

Before examining those manuscripts individually, the reader should know what the earliest Greek manuscript witness for the passage is. It is Codex Bezae<sup>13</sup> (D)—a fifth-century Greek-Latin diglot, one of the most important manuscripts of the New Testament, now housed in Cambridge University Library. Codex Bezae contains the *pericope* in full and is the oldest surviving continuous-text Greek manuscript to do so. Critics of the passage sometimes argue that Bezae represents an independent ‘Western’ textual tradition prone to expansion and therefore cannot be trusted. This argument, however, cuts against them more than for them. If Bezae’s text is genuinely independent of the Alexandrian tradition represented by Sinaiticus and Vaticanus—as is universally acknowledged—then its inclusion of the passage is not a copy of an Alexandrian reading but an independent

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex\\_Sinaiticus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Sinaiticus)

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex\\_Vaticanus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Vaticanus)

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus\\_66](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus_66)

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus\\_75](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus_75)

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_Henry\\_Ambrose\\_Scrivener](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Henry_Ambrose_Scrivener)

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B.\\_H.\\_Streeter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B._H._Streeter)

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt\\_Aland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Aland)

<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara\\_Aland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Aland)

<sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex\\_Bezae](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Bezae)

witness from an entirely different textual stream. Two geographically and textually independent traditions containing the passage are more significant than two geographically proximate manuscripts omitting it.

Turning to the manuscripts that omit the passage: Codex Vaticanus itself marks the end of John chapter 7 with an umlaut (¨)—a scribal symbol used to flag a disputed or variant reading at that point in the text. As Bruce Metzger observes in his *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed., United Bible Societies, 1994, pp. 187–189), this indicates that the scribe was aware of the passage and its contested status. Even the manuscript most frequently cited against the passage’s authenticity contains internal evidence that its scribe was aware the passage existed and was disputed—which is rather different from the passage being simply unknown.

Papyrus 66 (P66)—dated to approximately 200 A. D. and often cited alongside P75 as among the weightiest early witnesses against the passage—likewise repays closer examination. Several scholars, including Philip Comfort in his study of the early papyri, have observed that P66 exhibits anomalies at the relevant point in John 7–8 that suggest scribal awareness of the passage’s existence (Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts*, Broadman & Holman, 2005). The manuscript does not simply continue the text seamlessly as though the *pericope* had never been heard of; there are features of the transition that are most naturally explained by a copyist who knew of the passage and was deliberately passing over it. This is a more cautious form of the same argument made for the Vaticanus umlaut, and it applies the same logic: a copyist who shows signs of knowing the passage exists but omitting it is a quite different witness from one for whom the passage was entirely unknown.

#### THE NUMERICAL WEIGHT OF THE MANUSCRIPT TRADITION

The overwhelming majority of Greek manuscripts—numbering in the thousands—do *include* the passage. The Byzantine manuscript tradition<sup>14</sup>, which represents the widest and most geographically distributed textual witness, overwhelmingly contains these verses. Dean John William Burgon<sup>15</sup>, whose substantial scholarly work *The Causes of the Corruption of the Traditional Text* remains one of the most thorough defences of the passage, argued at length that the numerical and geographical weight of the manuscript tradition cannot simply be set aside in favour of two or three early codices, however distinguished. The antiquity of a manuscript does not automatically confer superiority—an early manuscript may itself preserve an early corruption. This is not a fringe view; it is a serious and well-reasoned position in textual scholarship.

Philip Mauro<sup>16</sup>, the American lawyer and biblical scholar whose analysis of the Revised Version drew on the collation work of Burgon and Scrivener, stated the numerical disproportion plainly: the most important departures of the Westcott-Hort text from the Received Text were made ‘with the support of less than one percent of all the available witnesses; or in other words, the readings discarded by the Revisers have the support of over 99 percent of the surviving Greek Texts, besides Versions and Fathers.’ (*Which Version? Authorized or Revised?*, 1924.) Whatever one concludes about individual disputed passages, the disproportionate weight of testimony is a fact that must be honestly reckoned with. The dismissal of the *Pericope Adulterae* rests on the testimony of a small fraction of the surviving witness—a fraction whose own character, as will be shown, gives grounds for serious caution.

The geographical dimension of this disparity deserves particular emphasis. John David Punch, whose doctoral dissertation at Radboud University Nijmegen (2010) represents one of the most thorough academic examinations of the manuscript evidence for and against the passage ever undertaken—over 400 pages—concluded from his own collation that the evidence for the omission of the *pericope*, while early, is mainly limited textually to the

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<sup>14</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine\\_text-type](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_text-type)

<sup>15</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Burgon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Burgon)

<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_Mauro](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Mauro)

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*Alexandrian text* and geographically to the **vicinity of Egypt**. The manuscripts that omit the passage are not geographically distributed across Christendom; *they cluster in a single region*. The **manuscripts that include it** are *geographically universal*—found across Asia Minor, Syria, Greece, Italy, Spain, North Africa, Armenia, and the Latin West alike. This geographical concentration of the negative evidence in Egypt, alongside the universal distribution of the positive evidence, is a fact that numerical counting alone does not fully capture but that any honest weighing of the testimony must account for.

The following table summarises the principal manuscript witnesses on each side, together with approximate dates, text-type, and stream designation:

Witness	Date	Stream	Text-type / notes	Passage
Papyrus 66 (P66)	c. 200 A. D.	Alexandrian	Egyptian	Omits
Papyrus 75 (P75)	c. 175–225 A. D.	Alexandrian	Egyptian (Sahidic-influenced)	Omits
Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ)	4th century	Alexandrian	Egyptian; umlaut at 7:52	Omits
Codex Vaticanus (B)	4th century	Alexandrian	Egyptian; umlaut end of ch. 7	Omits
Syriac Peshitta	5th century	Alexandrian-influenced	Eastern Syriac	Omits
Codex Ephraemi (C)	5th century	Mixed	Damaged at this point	Lacuna <sup>17</sup>
Codex Bezae (D)	5th century	Antiochian (Western)	Earliest Greek MS including passage	Includes
Vetus Latina (Old Latin)	2nd–4th century	Antiochian (Latin West)	Pre-Jerome; independent of Vulgate	Includes
Latin Vulgate (Jerome)	Late 4th century	Antiochian (Latin)	Based on Greek MSS known to Jerome	Includes
Byzantine Majority Text	5th–15th century	Antiochian	90%+ of all Greek MSS	Overwhelmingly present
Byzantine Lectionary Tradition	From 4th century	Antiochian	Appointed annually (St Pelagia)	Includes
Ferrar Group (f13)	11th–15th century	Antiochian (displaced)	Places passage after Luke 21:38	Includes

<sup>17</sup> *Lacuna* (pl. *lacunae*): a gap in a manuscript caused by physical damage or loss of material, as distinct from a deliberate scribal omission. At the relevant point in Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C), the original leaves are missing, making it impossible to determine whether the passage was present in that manuscript.

The pattern maps precisely onto the two-stream distinction: **the Alexandrian stream omits the passage; the Antiochian stream**—representing the continuous textual inheritance of the Greek-speaking church—**includes it overwhelmingly**. The umlaut markings in both Sinaiticus and Vaticanus confirm that even the primary Alexandrian witnesses show scribal awareness of the passage’s existence.

#### THE COLLAPSE OF THE WESTCOTT-HORT ‘NEUTRAL TEXT’ THEORY

The dismissal of the *pericope* by modern critical scholarship rests, historically, on the textual theory of Brooke Foss Westcott<sup>18</sup> and Fenton John Anthony Hort<sup>19</sup>, whose two-volume critical edition of the Greek New Testament was published in 1881—the same year as the English Revised Version. Westcott and Hort argued that Sinaiticus and Vaticanus represented a ‘Neutral’ text—a text-type that had never been subjected to deliberate revision and therefore preserved the original text more faithfully than any other tradition. On this theory, the omission of the *pericope* from these two manuscripts was effectively decisive: the ‘Neutral’ text did not have it; therefore the original did not have it.

This ‘Neutral text’ theory has since been substantially abandoned—not by traditional text defenders, but by the mainstream of critical scholarship itself. Kirsopp Lake<sup>20</sup>, whose work on the Caesarean text<sup>21</sup> is cited elsewhere in this document, was among those who demonstrated that the text of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus was not a ‘Neutral’ or unrevised original but a *regional text-type*—what subsequent scholarship calls the ‘Alexandrian’ text. B. H. Streeter, in *The Four Gospels* (1924), further dismantled the ‘Neutral text’ hypothesis by demonstrating that the text of Vaticanus showed evidence of revision and was not the pristine primitive document Westcott and Hort had supposed. Kurt Aland, the dominant figure in twentieth-century critical text scholarship and editor of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, acknowledged that the Westcott-Hort classification into text-types was oversimplified and that the ‘Neutral’ label had been abandoned. The modern critical text is not built on Westcott and Hort’s theory—it is built on a fresh, evidence-based evaluation of manuscripts, case by case. That means the confident theoretical foundation on which the *pericope* was dismissed in 1881 no longer exists. Those who still cite the passage’s absence from Sinaiticus and Vaticanus as effectively decisive are relying on a theoretical framework that critical scholarship itself has moved away from.

#### THE MODERN CRITICAL COMMITTEE’S OWN UNCERTAINTY—METZGER’S {C} RATING

This is further confirmed by a detail rarely mentioned in popular discussions: the rating assigned to the passage by the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament committee, whose decisions are recorded in Bruce Metzger’s *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (1971; 2nd edition, 1994). The committee assigned the passage a {C} rating—meaning, in the committee’s own grading system, that there was ‘considerable degree of doubt’ about the decision reached. The {A} rating signifies virtual certainty; {B} some doubt; {C} considerable doubt; {D} a very high degree of doubt. A {C} rating on the passage by the very committee responsible for the text of the modern critical editions is an admission, from within the critical establishment itself, *that the evidence is not clear-cut*. Those who cite modern critical editions as having definitively resolved the matter should be aware that the committee behind those editions explicitly flagged their uncertainty. **This is not the profile of a settled question.**

#### THE PRINCIPLE OF ERRORS OF OMISSION

There is a principle of evidence directly applicable to the manuscript case against this passage that is rarely stated clearly in popular discussions but is of fundamental importance. The commonest of all errors in the copying of

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<sup>18</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brooke\\_Foss\\_Westcott](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brooke_Foss_Westcott)

<sup>19</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F.\\_J.\\_A.\\_Hort](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._J._A._Hort)

<sup>20</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirsopp\\_Lake](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirsopp_Lake)

<sup>21</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesarean\\_text-type](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesarean_text-type)

manuscripts—and indeed in the repetition of any matter from memory—are errors of omission. A copyist’s eye slips; a distraction intervenes; a similar phrase at the end of one section draws the eye prematurely to a later section; and the intervening material is lost without trace. This is a universally recognised feature of scribal transmission, and it is the reason why, in the weighing of conflicting testimony, affirmative evidence carries inherently greater weight than negative evidence. As Mauro stated the principle (*Which Version?, Authorized or Revised?*, 1924): ‘the testimony of one competent witness, who says he saw or heard a certain thing, carries more weight than that of a dozen who, though on the spot, can only say that they did not see or hear it, or that they do not remember it.’ Applied to the manuscript tradition: the affirmative testimony of the hundreds of manuscripts that contain the *pericope* is, by this principle of evidence, inherently weightier than the negative testimony of the two that omit it—because omission is precisely the class of error to which scribal transmission is most prone.

This principle is given specific and documented force in the case of Codex Sinaiticus—the primary Greek manuscript cited against the *pericope*. Dr Scrivener, whose collation of Sinaiticus remains the standard work, demonstrated that the original scribe of that codex was characteristically and demonstrably prone to a particular form of omission error: *homoioteleuton*<sup>22</sup>, where the eye slips from the end of one passage to the end of a later passage with a similar ending or context, causing the entire intervening material to be dropped. Scrivener documented that this specific class of error occurs in Sinaiticus no fewer than 115 times in the New Testament alone. In many instances, as he records, ‘complete lines are omitted’ and ‘the copyist passed in the middle of a line to the corresponding portion of the line below.’ Burgon, **summarising Sinaiticus’ defects**, confirms that: ‘that gross blunder, whereby a clause is omitted because it happens to end in the same words as the clause preceding, occurs no less than 115 times in the New Testament.’ A scribe guilty of 115 such omission errors across the New Testament is not a reliable negative witness. His silence about a passage is not evidence that the passage did not exist in the manuscript he was copying—it may simply be evidence that his eye slipped past it.

#### THE OLD LATIN VERSIONS—A PRE-JEROME LATIN WITNESS

Before Jerome<sup>23</sup> produced the Vulgate<sup>24</sup> in the late fourth century, the Latin-speaking churches used a collection of translations now known collectively as the *Vetus Latina*<sup>25</sup>—the Old Latin versions. These are not a single unified translation but a family of distinct Latin texts, many of them traceable to the second and third centuries, produced independently across different regions of the Western church. Several Old Latin manuscripts contain the *pericope*. Their significance is direct: they are independent of Jerome and predate him by one to two centuries. Their inclusion of the passage cannot be attributed to any introduction by Jerome, because they existed before Jerome. The Old Latin witness is therefore a second strand of Latin attestation, earlier and independent of the Vulgate, confirming that the passage was known and used in the Latin-speaking West long before any question of a fourth-century editorial decision by Jerome could arise.

#### THE CLAIM THAT JEROME INTRODUCED THE PASSAGE

Frank Shallieu’s *New Testament Studies* states concerning this passage: ‘John 7:53 through 8:11 was probably introduced by the Roman Catholic Church at the time of Jerome, for subsequent to his day, this passage was included in some Latin and Greek manuscripts.’ This claim does not, however, survive historical scrutiny. Jerome, translating the Vulgate in the late fourth century, did not introduce the passage; he found it already present in

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<sup>22</sup> *Homoioteleuton* (Greek: ‘similar ending’): a scribal copying error in which the eye slips from one word or phrase to a later word or phrase with the same or similar ending, causing the intervening text to be omitted. One of the most frequently documented causes of accidental omission in manuscript transmission. See further: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homoioteleuton>

<sup>23</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerome>

<sup>24</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulgate>

<sup>25</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vetus\\_Latina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vetus_Latina)

numerous Greek and Latin manuscripts and included it on that basis. More decisively, multiple witnesses to the passage predate Jerome by centuries. Papias<sup>26</sup>, writing in the early second century, is recorded by Eusebius<sup>27</sup> as knowing a story about a woman accused of many sins before the Lord—widely identified as a reference to this very account. The third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum*<sup>28</sup> quotes from it directly. Ambrose of Milan<sup>29</sup> and Augustine of Hippo<sup>30</sup>—both contemporaries of Jerome, not dependants upon him—knew and cited the passage independently. To attribute the passage to Jerome when it was already known to multiple independent witnesses before and alongside him is simply not supportable by the evidence.

## JEROME AND THE LATIN TRADITION

Jerome explicitly noted that he found the passage in many Greek and Latin manuscripts of his day—pushing reliable attestation back across multiple independent traditions simultaneously. The Vulgate, which contained the passage, served as the authoritative biblical text of the Western church for over a thousand years. That is a significant witness, and it deserves more weight than it is sometimes given.

It is sometimes argued that the passage owes its wide Western currency to Roman Catholic influence—that the Vulgate’s authority embedded a non-original text in the tradition. This argument does not survive scrutiny. The Council of Trent<sup>31</sup> (1546) did formally declare the Vulgate to be the authentic Scripture of the church, and the Vulgate contains the *pericope*. But Trent did not introduce the passage; it simply codified what Jerome had included on the basis of the manuscripts available to him in the fourth century. More decisively, the Reformation translators—Luther<sup>32</sup>, Tyndale<sup>33</sup>, the Geneva Bible<sup>34</sup>, and the King James Version<sup>35</sup>—**all retained the passage from the Greek tradition, independently of Rome**. This point is developed more fully in the Reformation context section below.

## ASTERISKS, OBELI, AND THE WANDERING LOCATION

Many manuscripts that include the passage mark it with asterisks or obeli—symbols indicating that the copyist was aware of a dispute. This is sometimes cited as evidence against authenticity. It is equally evidence that the passage was known and circulating widely enough to be debated—a purely invented late insertion would be unlikely to generate such widespread discussion across multiple manuscript centres. The Harclean Syriac<sup>36</sup>—a seventh-century revision of the Peshitta<sup>37</sup> toward the Greek Majority Text, produced by Thomas of Harkel<sup>38</sup> in 616 A. D.—is particularly instructive in this regard: it includes the passage, marked with asterisks, indicating that its revisers were deliberately reintroducing a passage they knew had been absent from the older Syriac tradition. The asterisks in the Harclean are therefore not evidence of doubt about the passage’s existence but of a conscious editorial decision to restore it from the Greek Antiochian stream into the Syriac tradition—confirming that the passage was known, recognised, and regarded as belonging to the authentic text.

Similarly, the fact that the passage appears in different locations in different manuscripts—after John 7:36, after John 21:25, even within Luke after Luke 21:38 in one tradition—is sometimes cited as proof of spuriousness. It cuts the other way. This wide geographical and contextual distribution is far more consistent with an ancient, well-known, orally-circulated account than with a late scribal invention. Spurious insertions do not typically wander

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<sup>26</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papias\\_of\\_Hierapolis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papias_of_Hierapolis)

<sup>27</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eusebius>

<sup>28</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didascalia\\_Apostolorum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didascalia_Apostolorum)

<sup>29</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambrose>

<sup>30</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine\\_of\\_Hippo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustine_of_Hippo)

<sup>31</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council\\_of\\_Trent](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Trent)

<sup>32</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Luther](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther)

<sup>33</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Tyndale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Tyndale)

<sup>34</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva\\_Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_Bible)

<sup>35</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King\\_James\\_Version](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_James_Version)

<sup>36</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harklean\\_version](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harklean_version)

<sup>37</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peshitta>

<sup>38</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_of\\_Harqel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_of_Harqel)

across multiple Gospels. Particularly noteworthy is the Greek manuscript known as Codex Ferrarensis (f13)<sup>39</sup>, which places the passage after Luke 21:38—confirming that Greek-speaking scribes, not merely Latin ones, knew the account and were trying to find the right place for it. This is quite different from Latin scribes inventing and inserting a passage into John’s Gospel.

There is also a piece of independent early Western evidence that has tended to be overlooked. Rendel Harris<sup>40</sup>—the noted textual scholar—demonstrated that the Latin glossator of Acts 5:18 borrowed the words ‘and they went away each one to his house’ directly from John 7:53 (‘Codex Bezae’, *Texts and Studies*, vol. 2, 1891). This borrowing, he argued, was almost certainly the work of Montanists<sup>41</sup>—an ascetic second-century sect. Whether or not the Montanist attribution is accepted in every detail, the substance of the observation is significant: someone working with the text of Acts in the second century knew John 7:53 well enough to borrow its language as a gloss. This is independent early Western evidence that the passage was not merely copied into manuscripts but was sufficiently familiar to be quoted and adapted in an entirely different context. Passages that are late scribal inventions do not typically generate this kind of cross-textual echo at so early a date.

It is also instructive that scholars who rejected the passage’s authenticity—not conservatives defending it—nevertheless conceded that the evidence pointed to deletion rather than addition. Hilgenfeld<sup>42</sup>, writing in 1875 (*Historisch-Kritische Einleitung*, Leipzig), observed that ‘the bold presentation of the evangelist must at an early date, especially in the Orient, have seemed very offensive’, and regarded Augustine’s account of moralistic deletion as ‘altogether not improbable.’ Steck<sup>43</sup>, writing in 1893 (*Theologische Zeitschrift aus der Schweiz*, vol. 4), concluded that the *pericope* ‘was set aside out of moral prudery’ and that this ‘is easily understandable.’ These are nineteenth-century critical scholars making the deletion concession on purely historical grounds. When those who reject a passage’s genuineness are nonetheless compelled to agree with its defenders about why it disappeared from certain manuscripts, that convergence of testimony—from hostile witnesses—is not a minor point.

#### THE EVIDENCE OF THE LECTIONARY TRADITION<sup>44</sup>

One further witness deserves mention that tends to be overlooked in these discussions: the lectionary tradition. Lectionaries are not simply manuscript copies of the Gospels—they are collections of the passages appointed to be read aloud in church worship, week by week, across centuries. They represent, in other words, what the Christian communities actually used and trusted in practice. The Byzantine lectionary tradition, which is both ancient and geographically extensive, includes the *Pericope Adulterae* as an appointed reading—it is prescribed, for example, as the Gospel lection for Pentecost in certain Eastern traditions, and also as a reading for the feast of the woman taken in adultery. This is not a trivial point. It means that the passage was not merely copied into manuscripts but *was read publicly in worship* across the Eastern church **for centuries**—a form of continuous, living attestation quite different from, and independent of, the question of which manuscripts happen to omit it. A passage in regular liturgical use could not quietly disappear; it was too well known. The lectionary evidence thus provides an independent strand of testimony to the passage’s established place in the tradition.

#### A DOUBLE STANDARD IN MANUSCRIPT CRITICISM

It is also worth observing that the critical standard applied to this passage is not consistently applied elsewhere in the New Testament. Many other readings and verses not found in Sinaiticus or Vaticanus are retained without

<sup>39</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family\\_13](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_13)

<sup>40</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J.\\_Rendel\\_Harris](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._Rendel_Harris)

<sup>41</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montanism>

<sup>42</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf\\_Bernhard\\_Christoph\\_Hilgenfeld](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Bernhard_Christoph_Hilgenfeld)

<sup>43</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf\\_Steck](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Steck)

<sup>44</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectionary>

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controversy. To give only a few examples from the Gospels alone: Matthew 17:21 ('Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting'), Matthew 18:11 ('For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost'), Mark 16:9–20 (the resurrection appearances of Christ), Luke 9:55–56, Luke 17:36, John 5:4 (the angel troubling the water at Bethesda), and the doxology of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:13b—'For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen')—all absent from one or both of these manuscripts, all retained in the majority tradition, and none generating anything approaching the controversy directed at John 7:53–8:11. The singling out of the *Pericope Adulterae* for special scepticism, when the full weight of evidence is no more unfavourable than for several other disputed passages, is a point worth pressing. Those wishing to pursue the full extent of these omissions may consult Burgon's *The Revision Revised* (1881) or Will Kinney's survey article '*The Character of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus Texts*'<sup>45</sup>.

Canon Cook<sup>46</sup>, a Church of England scholar whose work on the Revised Version of the first three Gospels was entirely independent of Burgon, assessed the role of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus in the Revision with words that apply directly to the dismissal of the *pericope*:

*'The two oldest Mss. are responsible for nearly all the readings which we have brought under consideration—readings which, when we look at them individually, and still more when we regard them collectively, inflict most grievous damage upon our Lord's words and works.'*

—Canon Cook, *The Revised Version of the First Three Gospels* (1882)

And more precisely:

*'By far the greatest number of innovations, including those which give the severest shocks to our minds, are adopted on the testimony of two manuscripts, or even of one manuscript, against the distinct testimony of all other manuscripts, uncial and cursive. The Vatican Codex, sometimes alone, but generally in accord with the Sinaitic, is responsible for nine-tenths of the most striking innovations in the R.V.'*

—Canon Cook, *The Revised Version of the First Three Gospels* (1882)

Cook also assessed the theoretical framework underlying the Revision directly: 'Dr. Hort's system is entirely destitute of historical foundation.' This is not Burgon speaking. Canon Cook was a competent and independent authority whose focus was specifically the Gospel texts. His verdict that nine-tenths of the most damaging innovations in the Revised Version rest on the testimony of these two manuscripts—and that they 'inflict most grievous damage upon our Lord's words and works'—is directly relevant to a passage whose dismissal rests on precisely the same two witnesses.



The testimony of Frederick Henry Ambrose Scrivener is worth pausing on here. Scrivener was no partisan of the Received Text in the manner of Burgon; he sat on the English New Testament Revision Committee of 1870–1881 and was regarded by his contemporaries as the foremost authority in England on the manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. He was, if anything, a cautious moderate. Yet even he was compelled to acknowledge a fact that the confident dismissal of the *Pericope Adulterae* tends to pass over in silence.

<sup>45</sup> [https://textus-receptus.com/wiki/Article:\\_The\\_character\\_of\\_Sinaiticus\\_and\\_Vaticanus\\_texts\\_by\\_Will\\_Kinney](https://textus-receptus.com/wiki/Article:_The_character_of_Sinaiticus_and_Vaticanus_texts_by_Will_Kinney)

<sup>46</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederic\\_Charles\\_Cook](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederic_Charles_Cook)

In his *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., 1861), p. 386, he wrote:

*‘It is no less true to fact than paradoxical in sound, that the worst corruptions to which the New Testament has ever been subjected, originated within a hundred years after it was composed; that Irenaeus (A. D. 150), and the African Fathers, and the whole Western, with a portion of the Syrian Church, used far inferior manuscripts to those employed by Stunica, or Erasmus, or Stephens thirteen centuries later, when moulding the Textus Receptus.’<sup>47</sup>*

—F. H. A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 1st ed. (1861), p. 386

The significance of this testimony is considerable. Scrivener is here acknowledging—against the instinct of those who assume that ‘older is purer’—that the earliest patristic witnesses were working from inferior manuscripts; that the Alexandrian textual tradition, precisely that represented by Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, was already corrupted within a century of composition; and that the manuscripts underlying the Received Text, though compiled later, were in fact of superior quality. The man who sat as one of the principal manuscript scholars on the Revision Committee conceded that the textual tradition dismissed as ‘late’ was, in substance, the purer one.

But Scrivener went further still. He assessed the theoretical framework—the Westcott-Hort system—that elevated Sinaiticus and Vaticanus to near-supreme authority, and his verdict was unsparing. In his *A Plain Introduction to the Text of the New Testament* (1883) he wrote:

*‘We are compelled to repeat as emphatically as ever our strong conviction that the hypothesis to which he has devoted so many laborious years is destitute not only of historical foundation but of all probability resulting from the internal goodness of the text which its adoption would force upon us.’*

—F. H. A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (1883), p. 537, as cited in Mauro

These are not the words of a partisan defender of the Received Text. Scrivener sat on the Revision Committee and worked alongside Hort. He knew the theory from the inside and assessed it with the full resources of his scholarship. His conclusion—that Hort’s hypothesis is ‘destitute not only of historical foundation but of all probability’—is a verdict of the highest authority. Those who invoke the Westcott-Hort tradition as the warrant for dismissing the *Pericope Adulterae* are invoking a system described in precisely these terms by the ablest textual critic on the committee that adopted it.

#### **BURGON ON THE CHARACTER OF SINAITICUS AND VATICANUS—A ‘BLIND SUPERSTITION’**

It is at this point that the work of Dean John William Burgon becomes directly relevant—not merely as a defender of the *Pericope Adulterae*, but as the most thorough scholarly critic of the very manuscripts upon which its dismissal chiefly rests. Burgon personally collated both Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus and knew them at first hand. His conclusions are worth setting down plainly.



<sup>47</sup> F. H. A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., 1861), p. 386. Available at [archive.org: https://archive.org/details/plainintroductionooscri/page/386/mode/1up](https://archive.org/details/plainintroductionooscri/page/386/mode/1up)

On the elevation of these two manuscripts to a position of supreme textual authority, Burgon wrote in *The Revision Revised* (1881), page 11:

*‘Singular to relate, Vaticanus and Aleph<sup>48</sup> have within the last 20 years established a tyrannical ascendance over the imagination of the critics, which can only be fitly spoken of as a blind superstition. It matters nothing that they are discovered on careful scrutiny to differ essentially, not only from ninety-nine out of a hundred of the whole body of extant manuscripts besides, but even from one another.’*

—Dean J. W. Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (1881), p. 11

The word ‘superstition’ is Burgon’s own, and it is deliberately chosen. He was not speaking loosely. The point embedded in this passage is devastating: the two manuscripts that critics have elevated to near-supreme authority disagree not only with the overwhelming majority of all other manuscripts in existence, but with each other. Two manuscripts treated as a joint standard that cannot agree between themselves are a very frail foundation upon which to rest conclusions about what is and is not genuine Scripture.

The statistical evidence Burgon assembled confirms this. In the Gospels alone, Vaticanus omits at least 2,877 words, adds 536, substitutes 935, transposes 2,098, and modifies 1,132—a total of 7,578 departures from the received text. And Vaticanus has 589 readings quite peculiar to itself, affecting 858 words, whilst Sinaiticus has 1,460 such readings, affecting 2,640 words. **These are not minor variations at the margin.** They represent manuscripts of *substantial internal instability*—hardly the profile of texts deserving unconditional deference.

Burgon pressed the argument further, addressing the critics directly:

*‘We absolutely refuse to bow down before the particular specimens of Antiquity which you have arbitrarily selected as the objects of your superstition.’*

—Dean J. W. Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (1881)

And again, in a passage that cuts to the heart of the methodological question:

*‘The infatuation which prevails to this hour in this department of sacred Science can only be spoken of as incredible. . . the one distinctive tenet of the three most famous Critics since 1831 has been a superstitious reverence for whatever is found in the same little handful of early—but not the earliest—nor yet of necessity the purest—documents.’*

—Dean J. W. Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (1881)

‘Not the earliest, nor yet of necessity the purest.’ That phrase deserves to be underlined. Burgon’s argument was not that age is irrelevant but that age alone is not a sufficient criterion—and that these particular manuscripts, whatever their age, bear the marks of corruption on their face. The ‘three most famous Critics since 1831’ to whom Burgon refers are Lachmann (who in 1831 produced the first critical text to depart from the received tradition), Tischendorf (who discovered and edited Sinaiticus), and Westcott and Hort (whose 1881 critical text elevated Sinaiticus and Vaticanus to near-supreme authority and underpins most modern critical editions). Burgon had engaged with all three at length and regarded all three as methodologically unsound.

#### WHY THESE MANUSCRIPTS SURVIVED—BURGON’S ARGUMENT FROM PRESERVATION

One of Burgon’s most striking arguments concerns the very fact of these manuscripts’ survival. It is often presented as self-evidently significant that Sinaiticus and Vaticanus are ancient.

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<sup>48</sup> Codex Sinaiticus is conventionally designated Ⲁ (Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet), assigned by its discoverer Constantin von Tischendorf. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex\\_Sinaiticus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Sinaiticus).

Burgon turns this argument on its head:

*'We suspect that these two manuscripts are indebted for their preservation, solely to their ascertained evil character, which has occasioned that the one eventually found its way, four centuries ago, to a forgotten shelf in the Vatican library; while the other, after exercising the ingenuity of several generations of critical Correctors, eventually (viz. in A. D. 1844) got deposited in the waste-paper basket of the Convent at the foot of Mount Sinai. Had B and Aleph been copies of average purity, they must long since have shared the inevitable fate of books which are freely used and highly prized; namely, they would have fallen into decadence and disappeared from sight.'*<sup>49</sup>

—Dean J. W. Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (1881)

This is a pointed and memorable argument. A manuscript in constant liturgical use—trusted, valued, read aloud in worship week by week—wears out and is replaced. The copies that survive in pristine condition down the centuries tend to be those that were not used, because the churches that possessed them did not trust them. The very antiquity of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus may thus be evidence not of their superiority but of their rejection by the communities that knew them best. And it is worth noting, with some irony, that Burgon describes the discovery of Sinaiticus in a waste-paper basket—for that, as he records, is precisely where Tischendorf found it in 1844.

It is significant that this argument—which critics routinely dismissed as Burgon's special pleading—received independent confirmation from an entirely different direction. Kirsopp Lake, one of the most eminent naturalistic textual scholars of the early twentieth century and no ally of the Received Text tradition, conducted intensive research into the manuscript collections at Sinai, Patmos, and Jerusalem. He found himself compelled to conclude that 'scribes usually destroyed their exemplars when they copied the sacred books.' (*The Caesarean Text of the Gospel of Mark*, Harvard Theological Review, vol. 21, 1928.) If Lake is right, the manuscripts most frequently copied—those of the Traditional Text type—are precisely those most likely to have perished. The manuscripts that survived in pristine condition into the modern period are those that were not copied—because they were not used, because they were not trusted. The survival of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, on this reading, is not a testament to their authority but *to their disuse*. Burgon's argument, articulated without the benefit of Lake's later research, was confirmed by a scholar who approached the question from entirely different premises and with entirely different conclusions about the Traditional Text. When hostile witnesses independently arrive at a conclusion that supports your argument, that agreement is not nothing.

#### THE SIMONIDES CLAIM—AN UNRESOLVED QUESTION

There is a further matter concerning Codex Sinaiticus that, whilst it cannot be presented as proven, is sufficiently serious to warrant mention—and which at minimum adds to the grounds for treating uncritical deference to this manuscript with caution.



In September 1862, a Greek scholar by the name of Constantine Simonides<sup>50</sup>—a figure of extraordinary calligraphic skill and considerable controversy—made a precise and detailed public claim in the Guardian newspaper: that he himself had written the Codex Sinaiticus at Mount Athos in 1840, as a gift intended for Czar Nicholas I, at the suggestion of his uncle Benedict, head of the monastery of Panteleimon<sup>51</sup>. He claimed that Tischendorf had subsequently mistaken his nineteenth-century manuscript for one of the fourth century.

<sup>49</sup> *The Revision Revised*, p. 319.

<sup>50</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine\\_Simonides](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_Simonides) ; [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konstantinos\\_Simonides](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konstantinos_Simonides)

<sup>51</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St.\\_Panteleimon\\_Monastery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Panteleimon_Monastery)

J. A. Farrer, writing in *Literary Forgeries* (1907, pp. 39–66), examines this claim carefully and without advocacy. His conclusion is instructive: the matter ‘must remain among the interesting but unsolved mysteries of literature.’ He is not asserting that Simonides was telling the truth. But he is saying—and this from a sceptical author—that the claim cannot simply be dismissed. Several points he identifies are worth noting:

- Simonides’ calligraphic skill was, in Farrer’s words, ‘hardly open to doubt’ as sufficient to have produced the Codex—even Scrivener’s argument that no youth of nineteen could have composed nearly four million uncial letters was, Farrer notes, ‘not convincing where that youth was Simonides.’
- The Codex contains a portion of *The Shepherd of Hermas*—and Simonides was, as Farrer records, ‘the first scholar ever to have seen’ that work in Greek. Farrer describes this coincidence as ‘almost more singular than can be accounted for by chance.’
- The witnesses Simonides named—his uncle Benedict and a monk named Kallinikos—were both subsequently confirmed as real persons by Professor Lampros’ independent *Catalogue of the Mount Athos Manuscripts*, which records Benedict’s name appended to several manuscripts and confirms Kallinikos and Simonides working at the same monastery at the same time.
- No visitor to the monastery at Sinai before 1844 had apparently ever seen or heard of the Codex as belonging to the monks—a circumstance Farrer considers noteworthy.
- Tischendorf’s own acquisition of the Codex involved what Farrer calls ‘a very extraordinary story’—he removed 43 leaves on his first visit in 1844 without the monks’ full understanding, and on his third visit in 1859 obtained the manuscript under Russian imperial patronage in circumstances that the monastery disputed for over a century.

Farrer also makes a broader observation that is worth quoting, for it applies not only to Simonides but to the general pattern of textual scepticism:

*‘His contemporaries found it the easier course to reject as spurious anything connected with his name. . . . It is probable that scepticism has gone farther than was necessary in this direction, and that literature has lost in consequence some acquisitions that rightfully belong to it.’*

—J. A. Farrer, *Literary Forgeries* (1907), p. 66

The point being made here is not that Simonides was telling the truth about the Codex Sinaiticus—the scholarly consensus does not accept his claim, and it would be wrong to pretend otherwise. But the scholarly consensus is not infallible, and the point is this: the credentials of that manuscript are, to say the least, *not beyond question*. A manuscript whose provenance involved removal from a monastery under disputed circumstances, whose discovery was described even by a sympathetic account as ‘very extraordinary’, whose claim to antiquity was publicly contested by a named individual with specific and detailed allegations that could not simply be dismissed even by a sceptical author writing forty years later, and which Burgon independently characterised as a deeply corrupt text on the evidence of the manuscript itself—such a manuscript ought not to be treated as a near-infallible judge of what is and is not genuine Scripture. Yet that, in practice, is precisely the role it has been assigned in the dismissal of the *Pericope Adulterae*. Burgon’s critique of its character stands independently of whatever one concludes about Simonides.

#### THE SCHOLARS BEHIND THE ELEVATION—WESTCOTT AND HORT



Westcott & Hort

It is worth pausing to consider who, precisely, was responsible for elevating Sinaiticus and Vaticanus to the position of near-supreme authority they have come to occupy in modern textual criticism. The answer is principally Brooke Foss Westcott (1825–1901) and Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828–1892), whose critical Greek text—*The New Testament in the Original Greek*, published in 1881—

placed these two manuscripts at the centre of the critical tradition and underpins virtually all modern Bible translations and critical editions to this day.

The theological views of Westcott and Hort are well documented in their own letters and private writings<sup>52</sup>, and they are not easily dismissed. On the Received Text, Hort was unambiguous. Writing in December 1851 he described it as *‘that vile Textus Receptus leaning entirely on late MSS.’* and expressed relief that earlier manuscripts existed to replace it (*Life and Letters of F. J. A. Hort*, Vol. I, p. 211, Macmillan, 1896). On the question of biblical authority, Hort wrote to Lightfoot on 1 May 1860 that he could not cooperate with anyone who made *‘a decided conviction of the absolute infallibility of the N.T. practically a sine qua non’* (*Life and Letters of F. J. A. Hort*, Vol. I, p. 420). In the same correspondence, Westcott wrote to Hort on 5 May 1860 that he too must *‘reject the word infallibility — of Holy Scripture’* (*Life and Letters of Brooke Foss Westcott*, Vol. I, p. 207, Macmillan, 1903). Hort described systematic Bible readers as *‘bibliolaters’* whose habit of *‘reading so many chapters seems exactly to correspond to the Romish superstition of telling so many dozen beads on a rosary’* (*Life and Letters of F. J. A. Hort*, Vol. I, pp. 76–78). He denied the substitutionary atonement, describing *‘the popular doctrine of substitution’* as *‘an immoral and material counterfeit’* (*ibid.*, p. 430), and declared that *‘Protestantism is only parenthetical and temporary’* (*Life and Letters of F. J. A. Hort*, Vol. II, pp. 30–31).

Westcott expressed admiration for a Roman Catholic shrine and wrote that he *‘could have knelt there for hours’* (*Life and Letters of Brooke Foss Westcott*, Vol. I, p. 81); he was openly devoted to Marian shrines and believed in apostolic succession through the Roman Catholic line—neither position being consistent with the Protestant and Reforming tradition from which the Received Text emerged. These are not characterisations made by hostile critics. They are the men’s own words, preserved in their published correspondence. A useful compiled survey is David Blunt, *‘From Their Own Mouths’*, James Begg Society Traditional Text Pamphlets<sup>53</sup>.

This is not an ad hominem argument—it is a methodological one. Burgon himself makes precisely the same point, observing that textual methodology cannot be entirely divorced from theological presuppositions. A man who does not regard the Bible as the verbally inspired Word of God will approach its text with different assumptions from one who does. The presuppositions of Westcott and Hort shaped their methodology; their methodology elevated Sinaiticus and Vaticanus; and it is upon that elevation that the dismissal of the *Pericope Adulterae* substantially rests. These are facts the careful reader should weigh.

Equally important is how the Westcott-Hort text was introduced to the Revision Committee itself—for this bears directly on the authority that should be ascribed to the Committee’s implicit rejection of the *pericope*. Burgon documented that Westcott and Hort had circulated their unpublished Greek text among the Revision Committee members privately and, in his words, *‘under pledges of the strictest secrecy.’* The text had not been published; it had not been subjected to scholarly scrutiny; its principles had not been publicly examined. When the Revision Revised brought these facts to light, the scholarly world discovered that the Committee had implicitly endorsed a text they had never formally reviewed on its merits.

The actual procedure by which the Committee settled the Greek text at each point was described by one of its own members, Dr Newth, and confirmed as accurate by the chairman, Bishop Ellicott<sup>54</sup>. (Both accounts are cited and discussed by Philip Mauro, *Which Version?, Authorized or Revised?*, 1924.) The procedure was as follows: when a passage came under consideration, Dr Scrivener and Dr Hort would briefly state the evidence for and against

<sup>52</sup> Their private correspondence is preserved in Arthur Westcott, *Life and Letters of Brooke Foss Westcott*, 2 vols. (Macmillan, 1903), available at archive.org; and Arthur Hort, *Life and Letters of Fenton John Anthony Hort*, 2 vols. (Macmillan, 1896), available at archive.org.

<sup>53</sup> <https://neshherchristianresources.org/JBS/TTS/TTS5.html>

<sup>54</sup> Charles John Ellicott (1819–1905), Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol, chairman of the New Testament Revision Committee (1870–1881). See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Ellicott](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Ellicott).

the proposed change—and the Committee would then vote. There was no examination of the evidence by the Committee as a whole; no weighing of the manuscript testimony; no assessment of the character of the witnesses. As Mauro summarises: ‘in no case was there any examination of the question, or weighing of the evidence by the Committee.’ Sir Edmund Beckett’s observation is pointed: if Dr Newth’s account of the procedure ‘is not a kind of a joke, it is quite enough to settle this Revised Greek Testament in a very different sense.’ When those who are responsible for deciding that John 7:53–8:11 is doubtful Scripture reach that conclusion by majority vote after hearing a brief summary from two men—one of whom held a theory his own colleagues on the Committee regarded as unproven—the authority of that conclusion is considerably less than is generally assumed.

And the chairman of the Committee himself eventually conceded the point. Bishop Ellicott, writing in 1901, twenty years after the Revision was published, acknowledged three significant deficiencies in the Westcott-Hort system, drawing on the work of Dr Salmon of Trinity College Dublin. (These concessions are documented by Philip Mauro, *Which Version?, Authorized or Revised?*, 1924, and by the James Begg Society, *From Their Own Mouths: Westcott and Hort.*) Firstly, Hort ‘has shown too distinct a tendency to elevate probable hypotheses into the realm of established facts’—which is precisely what Burgon had argued in 1883. Secondly, the fourfold classification of manuscript families on which Hort’s system rests cannot be accepted, the objections being ‘both reasonable and serious.’ Thirdly, Westcott and Hort’s ‘continuous and studied disregard of Western authorities’ is a ‘grave drawback’, and it is ‘not unlikely’ that future discoveries will require ‘many decisions in the Text of Westcott and Hort’ to be modified. The chairman of the Revision Committee, after two decades of reflection, conceded that the theoretical foundations of the text underlying that committee’s rejection of disputed passages were in important respects unsound. That concession applies directly to the *Pericope Adulterae*.

One further documented fact in this connection deserves mention. Following the 1968 UBS-SPCU ‘Guiding Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible’—a formal agreement between the United Bible Societies and the Vatican’s Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity,<sup>55</sup> which required Bible translation committees to include equal Roman Catholic representation—Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, S. J.,<sup>56</sup> was added to the editorial committee of the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, the standard critical Greek New Testament published by the German Bible Society. This is the critical apparatus that underlies virtually all modern Bible translations since 1968 and that informs modern critical discussions of disputed passages, including the *Pericope Adulterae*. The involvement of a **Roman Catholic Jesuit Cardinal** in the editorial oversight of the standard critical Greek text *is not an allegation—it is a matter of documented institutional record*. (Source: Thomas P. Johnston, Ph.D., ‘Worldwide Bible Translation and Original Language Texts’, 16 January 2009, citing the 1968 and 1987 UBS-SPCU Guidelines.) Those who cite modern critical editions as authority for dismissing the passage are, perhaps without realising it, *citing a text produced under formal Roman Catholic editorial co-oversight*.

It is also relevant to note that the Greek lexical tradition underlying the principal Bible study tools used by most students of the New Testament—Vine’s Expository Dictionary, Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon, Berry’s Greek-English Interlinear, and others—flows directly from the Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon (*A Greek-English Lexicon*, first published 1843, 9th edition 1940), itself **a product of the same nineteenth-century Alexandrian critical tradition**. Thayer’s lexicon openly acknowledges its debt to Liddell-Scott; Vine’s and Berry’s are similarly dependent. This matters because when scholars make arguments about specific Greek words in disputed passages—including in the *Pericope Adulterae*—the lexical tools they reach for are those shaped by the same

<sup>55</sup> United Bible Societies and Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (Roman Catholic Church), ‘Guiding Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible’ (2 June 1968; revised edition, Rome, 16 November 1987). The 1987 revised edition is available at the Vatican’s own website: <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/documenti/altri-testi/en.html>. Discussed in Thomas P. Johnston, ‘Worldwide Bible Translation and Original Language Texts’ (16 January 2009), already cited.

<sup>56</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlo\\_Maria\\_Martini](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlo_Maria_Martini)

framework that elevated Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. The student of Scripture who is aware of this chain of dependence is better placed to exercise independent judgement.

#### AN HONEST ACKNOWLEDGEMENT—RUSSELL, WOODWORTH, AND SHALLIEU

Intellectual honesty requires an acknowledgement that the ‘oldest is best’ framework was not confined to Westcott, Hort, and their immediate circle. It was the dominant scholarly consensus of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it influenced those within the Bible Student movement as much as anyone else.

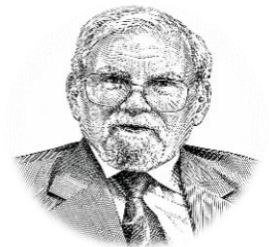


Pastor Russell himself, in the ZION’S WATCH TOWER of February 1880, described Codex Sinaiticus as ‘the oldest existing MSS’ and drew on its omissions to support textual conclusions. He was working, as most scholars of his time were, within the framework that Westcott and Hort had established or were in the process of establishing. His acceptance of this framework is a matter of historical record, and it does not diminish his many genuine contributions to biblical understanding. It does, however, mean that his occasional appeals to the authority of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus should be weighed accordingly—as the considered judgement of a faithful and learned man working within the best available scholarship of his era, rather than as a final pronouncement on a question that the evidence, more fully examined, renders considerably more complex.



C. J. Woodworth, in the *Berean Scripture Study Manual* of 1909—one of the individuals who later assisted in compiling and preparing *The Finished Mystery* and who remained loyal to Rutherford during the schism following Pastor Russell’s death in 1916—stated of Sinaiticus: ‘The Sinaitic MS. is perfect and complete and is the oldest known copy of the Scriptures, having been written (it is believed) in the year 331 A.D.’ The description of it as ‘perfect and complete’ is demonstrably inaccurate—Burgon catalogued thousands of corrections by multiple hands across the manuscript—but it faithfully reflects the consensus of the period.

Frank Shallieu, writing in his *New Testament Studies* on John 20:31, stated: ‘The Sinaitic and Vatican manuscripts are the most helpful in trying to see what the original Bible actually said. Although neither manuscript is infallible, both are vastly superior to other manuscripts, which are riddled with interpolations. The other manuscripts are perhaps 90 percent correct versus the Vatican and Sinaitic being 98 percent correct. Constantine had the Sinaitic Codex compiled from another manuscript. In the copying process, a few errors crept in, but that older manuscript has been lost.’ And at John 21:25 he writes: ‘The Berean Manual says that verse 25 is not in the Sinaitic manuscript. Certainly John did not write it.’ This is a confident and wide-ranging assessment, and it is the framework that underlies his commentary’s dismissal of the *Pericope Adulterae*. It is, however, a framework that Burgon challenged at length and with considerable statistical force—and one that the evidence assembled in this document suggests should not be accepted without scrutiny.

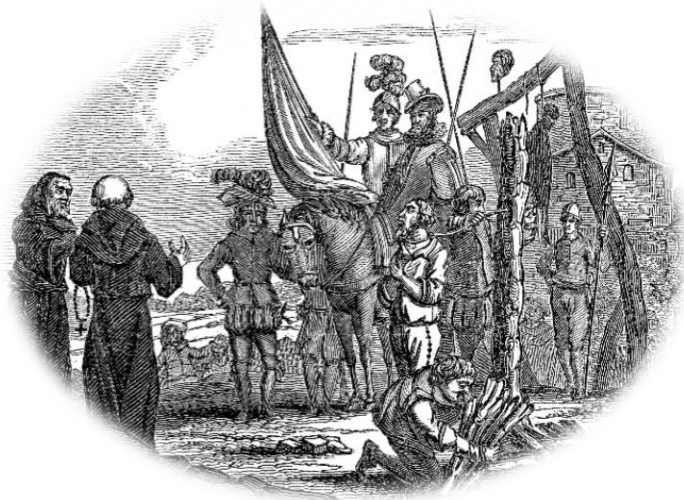


The point is not to censure any of these teachers. It is simply to observe that the assumption ‘oldest is best’ is exactly that—an assumption, not a demonstrated fact—and that it has been adopted, in varying degrees, by respected figures within the Bible Student tradition itself. That does not make it correct. The proper course is to examine all of the evidence (or as much, at least, as is possible): the manuscript tradition in its full breadth, the patristic testimony, the internal evidence, the historical context, and the known character of the manuscripts in question—rather than to rest a conclusion on the age of two manuscripts whose own credentials are, as this document has shown, not beyond question. God has preserved His Word (Isa. 40:8; 1 Pet. 1:25); but the question of precisely how He has done so, and through which textual tradition, is one that requires *careful and open-minded study* rather than deference to any single critical school.

## THE REFORMATION CONTEXT—WHY THE RECEIVED TEXT MATTERS

There is a broader historical context to the manuscript debate that is too often overlooked, and which is directly relevant to how the Alexandrian manuscripts came to be elevated above the Received Text, of the Antiochian stream, in the first place.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was, amongst other things, a return to the Greek and Hebrew sources of Scripture, in place of the Latin Vulgate that had served as the Roman Catholic Church's official text for over a millennium. This return to the original languages was actively and violently resisted.<sup>57</sup> William Tyndale, whose English New Testament was translated from the Greek in 1525–26, was strangled and burnt at the stake in 1536.



*'Rome thundred death, but Tyndale's dauntless eye  
Looked in death's face and smiled, death standing by,  
In spite of Rome, for England's faith he stood,  
And in the flames he sealed it with his blood.'*<sup>58</sup>



Martyrdom of Jan Huss

Jan Hus had been burnt in 1415 partly for his insistence on Scripture's authority over church tradition. The Council of Trent, meeting from 1545, formally declared the Latin Vulgate to be the sole authentic text of

<sup>57</sup> The Protestant Reformation's return to the Hebrew and Greek sources—the *ad fontes* principle—is the standard account in Reformation historiography; see Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 87–92. The resistance this met is exemplified by William Tyndale's own account: translating directly from the Greek rather than the Vulgate, he was driven from England, worked in exile, and was ultimately executed in 1536. His prologues to the New Testament (1525–1534), in which he declares his intention to translate from the Greek original, are available at: <https://www.faithofgod.net/TyNT/Prologue.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William\\_Tyndale\\_is\\_Burned\\_at\\_the\\_Stake.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_Tyndale_is_Burned_at_the_Stake.jpg)

Scripture—a direct response to the Reformers’ appeal to the Greek. The *Index of Forbidden Books (Index Librorum Prohibitorum)* maintained by Rome, in various forms until 1966, included many vernacular Bible translations.

The Roman Catholic response to the Protestant vernacular Bible<sup>59</sup> took the form not only of persecution but also of a *rival* English translation. The Douay-Rheims Bible—its New Testament published at Rheims in 1582, its Old Testament at Douai in 1609–10—was produced by English Catholic scholars in exile as a deliberate Counter-Reformation project,<sup>60</sup> explicitly described on its title page as being translated from the Latin Vulgate rather than from the Greek.<sup>61</sup> Its New Testament appeared almost thirty years before the King James Version. The KJV translators explicitly acknowledged it in their preface, devoting space to criticising its word choices, they stated explicitly:

‘We have shunned the obscurity of the Papists, in their AZIMES, TUNIKE, RATIONAL, HOLOCAUSTS, PRAEPUCE, PASCHE, and a number of such like, whereof their late Translation is full, and that of purpose to darken the sense, that since they must needs translate the Bible, yet by the language thereof, it may be kept from being understood.’<sup>62</sup>

**The connection to Sinaiticus and Vaticanus is indirect but real:** the Douay-Rheims was translated from Jerome’s Vulgate, which was itself influenced by the Alexandrian manuscript tradition and shares many readings with Vaticanus as a result. When modern critical editions, following Westcott and Hort, rejected the Received Text in favour of the Alexandrian manuscript stream readings, they were in many cases returning to readings that the KJV translators had *deliberately and knowingly rejected*.

Those translators were not ignorant of variant manuscript readings—the critical apparatus available to scholars of that period included knowledge of Alexandrian stream variants, and Erasmus dismissed Vaticanus as a Latinized manuscript—a Greek text altered to match the Vulgate—and therefore unreliable as a witness to the original New Testament.<sup>63</sup> The rejection of the Alexandrian tradition, predominantly located in Egypt, by the scholars who produced the Received Text and the King James Version was a considered judgement, not an oversight.

#### THE EMPHATIC DIAGLOTT—A NOTE ON ITS TEXTUAL BASIS

Closely connected to this discussion is the *Emphatic Diaglott*—the interlinear translation of the New Testament produced by Benjamin Wilson (1817–1900), first issued as a part-work from 1857 and published in a single volume in 1864 by Fowler and Wells of New York. The *Diaglott* played a significant role in the early Bible Student movement. It was through Wilson’s rendering of the Greek word *parousia* (παρουσία, *parousia*, G3952) as ‘presence’ rather than ‘coming’ that Russell—via Benjamin Keith, one of Nelson Barbour’s readers—came to understand Christ’s second advent as an invisible presence, a doctrine that became foundational to his teaching.<sup>64</sup> Once this connection was established, the



<sup>59</sup> A *vernacular* Bible is a translation of the Scriptures into the everyday spoken language of the people—English, German, French, and so on—as distinct from the Latin of the Vulgate, which was the language of the clergy but not of ordinary lay readers. The production of vernacular Bibles was central to the Protestant Reformation, which held that Scripture must be directly accessible to all believers in their own tongue.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Douai-Reims-Bible>

<sup>61</sup> All details are confirmed by the title page of the Bible itself: *The Holy Bible, Translated from the Latin Vulgate*—the Old Testament published by the English College at Douay, 1609, and the New Testament by the English College at Rheims, 1582. The full title page is visible at <https://archive.org/details/holybibletranslaooabalt>.

<sup>62</sup> ‘The Translators to the Reader’, prefixed to the King James Version (1611). Full text available at <https://www.bible-researcher.com/kjvpref.html>.

<sup>63</sup> An-Ting Yi, ‘The Changing Fortunes of Codex Vaticanus’, *Text and Canon* (7 September 2024), <https://textandcanon.org/the-changing-fortunes-of-codex-vaticanus/>—a scholarly overview of Erasmus’s rejection of Vaticanus and the subsequent history of the manuscript’s reception.

<sup>64</sup> Russell acknowledged Keith’s role directly in *ZION’S WATCH TOWER*, R187–188 (February 1881), p. 3, in the article ‘Cast Not Away Therefore Your Confidence’: ‘Bro. Keith (one of our contributors) was used of the Lord to throw another beam of light on the

WATCH TOWER SOCIETY endorsed the *Diaglott* warmly: the Old Theology Quarterly for April 1893 recommended it as ‘another of God’s special blessings for our day.’ (p. 9.) After Wilson’s death in 1900, Charles Taze Russell, then president of the WATCH TOWER BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY, approached Wilson’s family via a third party and obtained the copyright. The Society published the *Diaglott* in 1902, and later had the type reset for publication on its own presses in 1927, with an additional printing in 1942.<sup>65</sup> It thus became, for decades, effectively a WATCH TOWER publication—and continued to be widely used and consulted by Bible Students long after.

What is less commonly appreciated is the textual basis on which the *Diaglott* rests. The full title of the work is itself revealing: *The Emphatic Diaglott: Containing the Original Greek Text of what is Commonly Styled the New Testament (according to the Recension of Dr J. J. Griesbach) with an Interlineary Word for Word English Translation; a New Emphatic Version, Based on the Interlineary Translation, on the Renderings of Eminent Critics, and on the Various Readings of the Vatican Manuscript, No. 1209 in the Vatican Library.* The Greek text underlying the *Diaglott* is that of Johann Jakob Griesbach,<sup>66</sup> and the English version is based in part on the various readings of Codex Vaticanus.

Griesbach (1745–1812) was one of the earliest textual critics permitted to examine Codex Vaticanus directly. Access, however, was tightly restricted—according to S. P. Tregelles,<sup>67</sup> he ‘was never allowed to copy more than a few words at a time; and in order to make extracts from the manuscript, he had to commit to memory what he had seen, and then write it down afterwards’ (*An Account of the Printed Text of the Greek New Testament*, London: Bagster, 1854, p. 83). Griesbach’s Greek text, shaped in part by his engagement with the Alexandrian manuscript tradition, later exerted significant influence upon Benjamin Wilson’s *The Emphatic Diaglott*. The *Diaglott* was strongly endorsed by Charles Taze Russell and subsequently published by the WATCH TOWER BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY, giving Griesbach’s textual influence a long afterlife within the Bible Student tradition.

This is not a reason to dismiss the *Diaglott* completely, which contains much of genuine scholarly value and whose translation choices on specific Greek words are often insightful. It is, however, a reason for the careful reader to understand that the *Diaglott* is not a neutral or tradition-independent tool. Its Greek text stands squarely within the Alexandrian critical tradition—the same stream that produced Vaticanus and that Westcott and Hort later systematised into a method that elevated those manuscripts above the Majority Text. When the *Diaglott* is used to make arguments about the text of the New Testament—including arguments about the authenticity of disputed passages—this textual heritage should be borne in mind.

#### IN DEFENCE OF THE RECEIVED TEXT—TRADITION VERSUS PRINTED EDITION

Before turning to the Received Text, one further observation about the early papyrus witnesses is warranted. Papyrus 75 (P75) is frequently cited as among the weightiest manuscript witnesses against the *pericope*, given its age—dated to around 175–225 A.D.—and its close relationship with Codex Vaticanus. It is therefore important to understand what kind of text Papyrus 75 actually is.

Herman Charles Hoskier,<sup>68</sup> one of the foremost collators of New Testament manuscripts in the early twentieth century, argued that the Alexandrian textual tradition represented by Codex Vaticanus exhibited strong Egyptian affinities and reflected the broader Sahidic Coptic textual environment (*Codex B and Its Allies*, London: Quaritch,

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subject. . . . His surprise was, at finding that the Greek word *parousia* which signifies presence, had in our common version been improperly rendered coming.’ The full article is available in the WATCH TOWER Reprints at R187. For the fuller historical context of the *Diaglott*’s role in the early Bible Student movement see ‘The Emphatic Diaglott and the Watch Tower Society’, <https://truthhistory.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-emphatic-diaglott-and-watch-tower.html>.

<sup>65</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emphatic\\_Diaglott](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emphatic_Diaglott)

<sup>66</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann\\_Jakob\\_Griesbach](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Jakob_Griesbach)

<sup>67</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_Prideaux\\_Tregelles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Prideaux_Tregelles)

<sup>68</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herman\\_C.\\_Hoskier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herman_C._Hoskier)

1914). Building on Hoskier's work, Edward F. Hills contended that this Egyptian influence also extended to Papyrus 75, citing several readings in which P75 aligns closely with the Sahidic version against the dominant Greek manuscript tradition (*The King James Version Defended*, 4th ed., 1984, ch. 5, §3b). Hills pointed particularly to variants in Luke 16, John 10:7, John 11:12, and John 8:57 as evidence of close affinity between P75 and the Sahidic textual tradition.

The significance of these readings remains debated. Critics of the Alexandrian text argue that such agreements suggest that P75 was not wholly independent of the Egyptian Coptic textual environment, and therefore its testimony against passages such as John 7:53–8:11 should not automatically be treated as decisive. Mainstream textual critics, however, generally interpret these agreements as evidence of a shared early Egyptian textual tradition rather than corruption arising from Coptic influence.

A charge frequently levelled against the Textus Receptus—the Received Text underlying the King James Version—is that it rests on only a handful of manuscripts: that Desiderius Erasmus, compiling his first printed Greek New Testament in 1516, had access to just a few late Byzantine minuscules, and that the text produced from such a narrow base cannot be trusted over against the ancient Alexandrian witnesses of Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. This charge contains a partial truth but conceals a more important distinction.

It is true that Erasmus' first edition, published in Basel in 1516, was compiled with some haste from a small number of late Byzantine manuscripts, several dating from around the twelfth century, and that he lacked a complete copy of Revelation, being compelled to back-translate its final verses from the Latin Vulgate (Kurt and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2nd English ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989; F. H. A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 4th ed., London: George Bell & Sons, 1894, II:183–191). These are genuine limitations of the first printed edition, and they should not be glossed over. However, the Textus Receptus did not stand still at 1516. Erasmus himself revised it in 1519, 1522, 1527, and 1535. Robert Estienne (Stephanus) produced four editions (1546, 1549, 1550, 1551), the third of which included a critical apparatus drawing on Codex Bezae and numerous additional manuscripts (Scrivener, *Plain Introduction*, II, p. 229). Theodore Beza published nine independent editions between 1565 and 1604, the 1598 edition being the primary Greek text used by the KJV translators (F. H. A. Scrivener, *The Authorized Edition of the English Bible (1611): Its Subsequent Reprints and Modern Representatives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1884, pp. 60–62). At least three-quarters of a century of scholarship had gone into the Textus Receptus by the time of the King James Version. The Textus Receptus that underlies the KJV is therefore a substantially more developed and refined text than Erasmus' 1516 first edition.

More importantly still, the Textus Receptus as a printed text must be distinguished from the Byzantine or Majority Text tradition that it represents. The Textus Receptus was not an invention—it was a codification of the Greek text long preserved and transmitted throughout the Greek-speaking church. And that tradition is not confined to a handful of manuscripts. Of the thousands of continuous-text and lectionary manuscripts of the New Testament, the overwhelming majority are predominantly Byzantine in character (Kurt and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, pp. 138–140). This is acknowledged not only by defenders of the Received Text but by critical text scholars themselves: D. A. Carson, writing from within the critical tradition, stated that 'there are far more manuscripts extant in this tradition than in the other three combined' (*The King James Version Debate*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, p. 26). The charge that the Received Text rests on 'only a few manuscripts' mistakes the printed edition for the broader textual tradition it represents. In reality, the Received Text aligns with the overwhelming numerical majority of the surviving Greek manuscript tradition (the Antiochian stream of manuscripts).



Desiderius Erasmus had indirect access to selected readings from Codex Vaticanus through correspondence with Paulus Bombasius<sup>69</sup> and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda.<sup>70</sup> Sepúlveda claimed to have supplied Erasmus with hundreds of variant readings from the manuscript (T. H. Horne, ed. S. P. Tregelles, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, London, 1856, vol. IV, pp. xv–xvi). In later correspondence Erasmus expressed distrust toward readings associated with Vaticanus, believing them to reflect Latin influence and speculating that certain Greek manuscripts had been corrected to conform to the Vulgate during periods of ecclesiastical union between the Greek and Roman churches. Henk Jan de Jonge,<sup>71</sup> one of the foremost modern Erasmian scholars, summarised Erasmus’ position succinctly: ‘Erasmus regarded the text of this codex as influenced by the Vulgate and therefore inferior’ (*Erasmus and the Comma Johanneum*’ *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 56 [1980]: 385).

That judgement is consistent with John William Burgon’s later statistical critique, in which he argued that Codex Vaticanus contains numerous singular readings, extensive departures from the majority tradition, and many corrections introduced by later hands (*The Revision Revised*, London: John Murray, 1883, pp. 317–320; cf. 12–20).

The proper comparison, therefore, is not between ‘a few manuscripts’ and ‘many manuscripts’, but between two major textual streams with fundamentally different histories of transmission. On one side stands the Alexandrian stream, represented especially by Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus—manuscripts highly valued by modern critical scholarship because of their antiquity, but whose textual character was sharply disputed by scholars such as John William Burgon and Herman Charles Hoskier, who argued that these manuscripts contained numerous corruptions and anomalous readings (H. C. Hoskier, *Codex B and Its Allies*, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1914; John William Burgon, *The Revision Revised*, London: John Murray, 1883, pp. 11–20). Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort gave this stream a privileged position in their 1881 edition, relegating the Byzantine stream to secondary status on the basis of their genealogical theory (*The New Testament in the Original Greek*, Introduction, 1882)—a theory whose original formulations have since been substantially revised within mainstream critical scholarship (Kurt and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2nd English ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, pp. 53–63).

On the other side stands the Antiochian (or Byzantine) stream, represented by the overwhelming numerical majority of surviving Greek New Testament manuscripts and preserved and widely transmitted throughout the Greek-speaking church for many centuries before being expressed in printed form by Desiderius Erasmus, Robert Estienne, and Theodore Beza in what later came to be known as the Textus Receptus. The debate, therefore, is not simply about numbers versus age, but about how textual history itself should be interpreted—and it is the elevation of the Alexandrian stream, as reflected especially in early Egyptian witnesses such as Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, above this continuous ecclesiastical text that has shaped the treatment of the *Pericope Adulterae* in modern critical editions.

*lumus videri) ut investigandi labor ab-  
sit, utilissime dividimus. Textum er-  
go habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum:  
in quo nihil immutatum aut corru-  
ptum damus. Qui, cum lapides ac*

<sup>69</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paulus\\_Bombasius](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paulus_Bombasius)

<sup>70</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan\\_Gin%C3%A9s\\_de\\_Sep%C3%BAlveda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_Gin%C3%A9s_de_Sep%C3%BAlveda)

<sup>71</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henk\\_Jan\\_de\\_Jonge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henk_Jan_de_Jonge)

## 5. THE TESTIMONY OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

It is sometimes argued that the silence of certain early Greek fathers—Origen,<sup>72</sup> Chrysostom,<sup>73</sup> Cyril of Alexandria<sup>74</sup>—on this passage is weighty evidence against it. Several things need to be said about this. Firstly, none of these fathers explicitly deny or reject the passage—silence is simply silence, and it has many possible explanations. Secondly, and more decisively, the argument from silence is directly answered by the positive testimony of those early witnesses who do speak—and they are numerous, geographically diverse, and chronologically early. Thirdly, and most specifically, the silence of the named Greek commentators is fully explained by two factors operating together rather than separately: the ancient Pentecostal lectionary (that is, the lectionary lesson appointed for the feast of Pentecost—not the modern Pentecostal movement) excluded the passage from public reading, and the subject matter—a woman caught in adultery—made it actively controversial to cite in an era of severe penitential discipline. Origen, Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Apollinarius,<sup>75</sup> and Theodore of Mopsuestia<sup>76</sup> all wrote commentaries following the lectionary text. The Pentecost lesson ran from John 7:37 to John 8:12, omitting John 7:53–8:11. Commentators on the publicly-read text did not comment on what was not publicly read. As Burgon observed: ‘Why should they—how could they—comment on what was not publicly read before the congregation?’ And even had a given father wished to cite the passage independently, the well-documented severity of early church discipline regarding adultery—Cyprian<sup>77</sup> and Tertullian<sup>78</sup> explicitly treated it as an unpardonable sin, and the Syrian church formally declared it such—made the passage uncomfortable to invoke. Augustine himself noted that certain men removed the passage from manuscripts precisely because of this moral nervousness. These two factors—lectionary exclusion and moral unease—most plausibly account for the silence of the Greek fathers, without requiring any inference that they rejected or were unaware of the text.

The Eastern church was not, however, silent about the passage in its entirety. John 8:3–11 was appointed as the annual lectionary lesson for the feast of St. Pelagia—October 8—throughout the Greek-speaking church, as far back as records extend (Burgon, *The Revision Revised*, 1881, Article III; confirmed by manuscript 1333, which carries the explicit marginal rubric: ‘The Gospel-reading for October 8, for Saint Pelagia’). This feast appointment reaches back to the very same period in which those fathers whose silence is invoked were active. The passage was thus being read publicly every year in Eastern worship, generating its own stream of liturgical familiarity quite apart from commentary on John’s Gospel. The great Eastern church, as Burgon put it, ‘speaks out on this subject in a voice of thunder’ through this annual lectionary appointment (*The Revision Revised*, Article III). Those who cite the silence of Chrysostom and Cyril should account for the fact that the church over which they presided was reading the passage every year from the lectern at the feast of St. Pelagia.

### EUSEBIUS’ CANON TABLES—AN OBJECTION ANSWERED

One patristic argument against the passage that is occasionally cited but deserves a direct answer is the absence of the *pericope* from Eusebius of Caesarea’s<sup>79</sup> canon tables. Eusebius (c. 260–339 A. D.), the church historian, devised a system of numbered cross-references designed to allow readers to find parallel passages across the four Gospels—

<sup>72</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origen>

<sup>73</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Chrysostom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Chrysostom)

<sup>74</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyril\\_of\\_Alexandria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyril_of_Alexandria)

<sup>75</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollinaris\\_of\\_Laodicea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollinaris_of_Laodicea)

<sup>76</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore\\_of\\_Mopsuestia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_of_Mopsuestia)

<sup>77</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprian>

<sup>78</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tertullian>

<sup>79</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eusebius> ; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eusebian\\_Canons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eusebian_Canons)

an early form of concordance. The *pericope* does not appear in these canon tables. Some scholars have cited this as evidence that Eusebius' copies of John did not contain the passage.

The objection is weaker than it first appears, for two reasons. First, Eusebius' canon tables were designed specifically for *synoptic* cross-referencing—identifying parallels between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Material unique to a single Gospel and without a parallel in any other Gospel was not systematically indexed. Since the *pericope* has no synoptic parallel, its absence from the canon tables is exactly what one would expect whether or not Eusebius' copies of John contained it. Second, Eusebius is himself the source who records that Papias—a disciple of the Apostle John—knew a story about a woman accused before the Lord of many sins (Ecclesiastical History 3.39.17), widely identified as a reference to this very incident. If Eusebius was transmitting Papias' knowledge of the account whilst simultaneously having no knowledge of it in John, that would require a very peculiar selectivity on his part. The more natural reading is that the canon tables' silence reflects the design of the system, not the absence of the passage from his text.

### PAPIAS (EARLY SECOND CENTURY)

Eusebius of Caesarea records that Papias—a disciple of the Apostle John, a figure of the apostolic generation itself—knew a story about a woman accused before the Lord of many sins. Eusebius' own words are: '*And he [Papias] relates another story of a woman who was accused before the Lord of many sins, which is contained in the Gospel according to the Hebrews.*'—(Ecclesiastical History, 3.39.17.) Many scholars identify this as a reference to the *Pericope Adulterae*. If this identification is correct, knowledge of the incident goes back to the apostolic circle itself—long before any question of a Jeronian or Roman Catholic introduction could arise.

### DIDASCALIA APOSTOLORUM (THIRD CENTURY)<sup>80</sup>

This early third-century Syrian church manual—one of the oldest surviving documents of Christian church order—contains a clear and specific reference to the account in the course of instructing bishops on the extension of mercy to penitent sinners. The precise reference is chapter 2.24 (Funk edition, vol. I, p. 93). Without naming John's Gospel explicitly, it quotes words corresponding directly to John 8:10–11 as a well-known, authoritative example of Christ's conduct—treating the account not as a novelty but as established common ground between the author and his readers:

' . . . to do as He also did with her that had sinned, whom the elders set before Him, and leaving the judgment in His hands, departed. But He, the Searcher of Hearts, asked her and said to her: Have the elders condemned thee, my daughter? She saith to Him: Nay, Lord. And He said unto her: Go thy way: neither do I condemn thee.'

—Didascalia Apostolorum, 2.24 (Funk ed., I, 93), third century A. D.

The passage is not introduced with any note of doubt or qualification. It is simply cited, as a climactic illustration of divine mercy, to encourage bishops to deal gently with sinners. This tells us two things: first, that the account was sufficiently well established in third-century Syria to serve as authoritative common ground in a church manual; and second, that the account was being used doctrinally—not as a contested text but as a recognisable and settled example of the Lord's conduct.

It is worth noting that even scholars who question the passage's Johannine authorship treat the *Didascalia* quotation as the primary surviving evidence for the account's earliest form. Bart Ehrman proposed that the passage as it appears in John is a conflation of two earlier independently circulating accounts, one of which—the form known to Papias and the *Didascalia*—he termed 'PAEAST' (Bart D. Ehrman, 'Jesus and the Adulteress', *New Testament Studies* 34, 1988, pp. 24–44). Kyle Hughes, developing Ehrman's thesis, concluded that this *Didascalia*

<sup>80</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didascalia\\_Apostolorum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didascalia_Apostolorum)

form was almost certainly part of Luke’s special source material, dating its transmission to the first century; he affirmed that the account ‘would almost certainly not have been the kind of account the early church would have invented’ and that ‘we can affirm the essential historicity of the event’ (Kyle R. Hughes, ‘The Lukan Special Material and the Tradition History of the *Pericope Adulterae*’, *Novum Testamentum* 55.3, 2013, pp. 232–251, at p. 247). The *Didascalia* witness is thus accorded central importance even by those who reject Johannine authorship — and the historicity of the underlying event is conceded by those same scholars.<sup>81</sup>

#### THE APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS (C. 380 A. D.)<sup>82</sup>

This fourth-century expansion of the *Didascalia* echoes the same appeal in its own treatment of the same subject:

‘And when the elders had set another woman who had sinned before Him, and had left the sentence to Him, and were gone out, our Lord, the Searcher of the hearts, inquiring of her whether the elders had condemned her, and being answered No, He said unto her: Go thy way therefore, for neither do I condemn thee.’

—*Apostolic Constitutions*, Book II.24, late third to fourth century A. D.

These two documents, separated by perhaps a century and independently drawing on the same account for the same doctrinal purpose, confirm that the *pericope* was actively cited and used across more than a century of church life in the Eastern tradition, entirely independently of the Latin West.

#### PACIAN OF BARCELONA (C. 310–391 A. D.)

Pacian,<sup>83</sup> a fourth-century Spanish bishop, provides an additional early witness that tends to be overlooked entirely. Writing against the rigorist Novatians<sup>84</sup>, who denied any possibility of post-baptismal forgiveness for serious sins, he appeals directly to the *pericope* as a Gospel authority. The Bible Researcher website (*Woman Taken in Adultery*, drawing on Edward F. Hills’ textual scholarship) records his words as follows:

‘Are you not willing to read in the Gospel that the Lord also spared the adulteress who confessed, whom no man had condemned?’

—Pacian of Barcelona, c. 370 A. D., cited in E. F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended*

Pacian is appealing to the passage as something his opponents themselves know from the Gospel—he is not introducing a novelty but citing a recognised authority. And he is doing so in Spain, independently of the North African and Italian traditions, which confirms that the passage was known and used across the breadth of the Western church by the fourth century.

#### AMBROSE OF MILAN (339–397 A. D.)

Ambrose is confirmed as having preached on the passage around 374–375 A. D.—independently of Jerome and indeed some years before him. The witness of Ambrosiaster (a Latin commentator writing between 366 and 384 A. D.)<sup>85</sup> falls within the same period, providing a second independent Latin witness from this era. Ambrose notes that the passage ‘caused offence to the unskilled’—meaning it was already sufficiently well known in his congregations to generate controversy—and preserves a striking early tradition about what Christ wrote in the dust. As one scholarly summary records, the passage was actively cited by Ambrose as a pastoral and doctrinal authority in the Western church from the 370s onward. The detail about Christ writing in the dust—preserved

<sup>81</sup> Kyle R. Hughes, ‘The Lukan Special Material and the Tradition History of the *Pericope Adulterae*’, *Novum Testamentum* 55.3 (2013), pp. 232–251, at p. 247. Article available at <https://kylerhughes.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/the-lukan-special-material-and-the-tradition-history-of-the-pericope-adulterae.pdf>. Summarised by Daniel B. Wallace at <https://danielbwallace.com/2013/06/26/where-is-the-story-of-the-woman-caught-in-adultery-really-from/>. Building on Bart D. Ehrman, ‘Jesus and the Adulteress’, *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988), pp. 24–44.

<sup>82</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostolic\\_Constitutions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostolic_Constitutions)

<sup>83</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacian>

<sup>84</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novatianism>

<sup>85</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambrosiaster>

in preaching and in early Christian art—suggests a tradition of considerable antiquity, predating any question of Jeromian introduction by decades.

**DIDYMUS THE BLIND OF ALEXANDRIA (C. 313–398 A. D.)**<sup>86</sup>

Didymus the Blind, the celebrated head of the catechetical school at Alexandria in the fourth century, explicitly knew and commented on the passage. His commentary was discovered in 1941 among the Tura papyri near Cairo—a cache of texts preserved since antiquity—and it contains a direct reference to the account, making him the earliest clear Greek patristic witness.

He writes:

‘We find in certain gospels a woman who had sinned, accused before the Lord, and was sent away, that there should be no further examination of her case.’

—Didymus the Blind, *Commentarii in Ecclesiasten*, 223.6–13 (Tura papyrus)

The phrase ‘in certain gospels’ reflects manuscript diversity in Alexandria—some copies had the passage and some did not—but what is beyond doubt is that Didymus knew the account, drew upon it, and treated it as a recognisable part of the Gospel tradition. This is a fourth-century Alexandrian Greek witness—exactly where Sinaiticus and Vaticanus originate—and he knew the passage. That is a point that the manuscript argument conveniently passes over. Didymus was not in some distant corner of the church unfamiliar with Alexandrian scribal traditions. He was the head of the Alexandrian catechetical school—the most distinguished theological institution in the very city from which the manuscripts that omit the *pericope* come. If the Alexandrian manuscript tradition had so comprehensively suppressed or forgotten the passage that no trace of it reached learned Alexandrians, Didymus could not have written what he wrote. His knowledge of the passage, in Alexandria, in the same century as those manuscripts, is direct evidence that the Alexandrian omission was a scribal-liturgical decision, not a reflection of genuine ignorance of the text.

**JEROME (C. 347–420 A. D.)**

Before turning to Augustine, it is worth pausing on Jerome’s direct testimony, which deserves to stand on its own rather than being merely summarised. Writing in his work *Against the Pelagians* around 415 A. D., Jerome stated:

*In Euangelio secundum Iohannem in multis et Graecis et Latinis codicibus inuenitur de adultera muliere, quae accusata est apud Dominum.*

—Jerome, *Adversus Pelagianos*, 2.17 (c. 415 A. D.)

In English: ‘The story of the adulterous woman who was accused before the Lord is found in many Greek and many Latin manuscripts of the Gospel of John.’ This is not a vague general claim. Jerome is writing in 415 A. D., at a time when the manuscript tradition was actively living and he had access to a wide range of Greek and Latin copies. He found the passage in many of them—and not only in the Latin Vulgate tradition he had himself produced, but in the Greek as well. He also uses the passage as an authoritative text in his rebuke of the Pelagians—something no careful scholar would do with a passage whose authority was genuinely in doubt.

**AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354–430 A. D.)**

It is worth pausing on Augustine, because his testimony here is directly relevant on more than one level. He not only cited the passage repeatedly but offered what remains



<sup>86</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didymus\\_the\\_Blind](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Didymus_the_Blind)

one of the most penetrating explanations of why it may have been omitted from certain manuscripts:

*‘Certain persons of little faith, or rather enemies of the true faith, fearing, I suppose, lest their wives should be given impunity in sinning, removed from their manuscripts the Lord’s act of forgiveness toward the adulteress, as if he who had said “sin no more” had granted permission to sin.’*

—Augustine of Hippo, *De Adulterinis Conjugiis*, II.7

This is a remarkable statement. Augustine is writing while the manuscript tradition is still actively being copied and discussed—he is far closer to the evidence than any modern critic. He identifies a specific, historically credible human motive for the deliberate removal of the passage: certain men feared that their wives, taking comfort from the passage, would consider themselves at liberty to commit adultery without consequence. That fear was a misreading of Christ’s words—‘sin no more’ is a command to cease from sin, not a permission to commit it—but Augustine’s point is precisely that this misreading existed, and that some scribes or owners of manuscripts acted upon it by removing the passage altogether. That explanation is psychologically plausible, entirely consistent with what is known of scribal practice, and provides a compelling account of why certain manuscripts might omit a passage that the majority tradition preserves. It is, in short, a better explanation than forgery.

It is also important to note what Augustine’s explanation implies about the passage itself. The irony he identifies is acute: the words ‘sin no more’—which are a direct command against the continuation of sin—were read by some as though Christ had granted permission to sin once without penalty. The passage was removed not because it was morally permissive, but because its mercy was misread as permissiveness. Those who today object that the passage ‘encourages laxity’ are, unknowingly, repeating the very misreading Augustine was correcting.

What makes this explanation still more compelling is that it was not confined to Augustine’s time and place. A Greek writer named Nikon—attributed by most scholars to the tenth century, though Westcott and Hort placed him in the thirteenth<sup>87</sup>—recorded that the Armenians had ‘cast out the account which teaches us how the adulteress was taken to Jesus, saying that it was harmful for most persons to listen to such things’ (cited in Edward F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, 4th ed., 1984, Chapter 6; Nikon’s treatise is referred to as ‘On the Impious Religion of the Vile Armenians’). This is a direct and explicit acknowledgement, made in the Eastern church centuries after Augustine, that the motive for the passage’s suppression was precisely what Augustine had identified—a moralistic nervousness about its pastoral effect, not a textual judgement about its authenticity. The moralistic scruple was still operative, still being openly avowed, and still producing the same result: deliberate omission. This is powerful confirmation that Augustine’s account of the deletion motive was not a local Latin phenomenon but a tendency that ran across the full breadth of the ancient church.

In *Tractate 33* on John’s Gospel, Augustine engages with the passage at length and draws out its moral precision with characteristic clarity. He makes a careful and important distinction—Christ condemned the sin, not the sinner; the passage is not a licence for adultery but a refusal to execute an adulterer in a legally defective proceeding:

*‘Therefore the Lord did also condemn, but condemned sins, not man. For if He were a patron of sin, He would say, Neither will I condemn you; go, live as you will: be secure in my deliverance; how much soever you will sin, I will deliver you from all punishment even of hell. He said not this.’*

—Augustine of Hippo, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 33.6

<sup>87</sup> see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus\\_and\\_the\\_woman\\_taken\\_in\\_adultery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_and_the_woman_taken_in_adultery)

And his celebrated summary of the encounter itself:

*Relicti sunt duo: misera et misericordia.—‘There remained two: the wretched one and mercy.’*

—Augustine of Hippo, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 33.5

The accused woman, standing alone before the Lord who is mercy incarnate—her accusers gone, no lawful witness remaining, no sentence pronounced—and the Lord who, as Augustine makes clear in the very next breath, condemns sin without condemning the sinner. It is difficult to believe that so precise and so organically theological an insight was prompted by a forged text.

## 6. THE DISPENSATIONAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT: LAW, REPENTANCE, AND THE MINISTRY OF CHRIST

One of the most important dimensions of this debate—and one that is too often neglected—concerns the theological and historical context within which Christ’s ministry took place. Those who argue that Christ would have been ‘obligated to agree to the stoning’ assume that the Mosaic penal code was fully in force, fully operative, and to be applied strictly in every case Christ encountered. An examination of the Scriptures and of history calls each of these assumptions into question.

### ‘THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS WERE UNTIL JOHN’

*‘For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.’—(Matthew 11:13)*

*‘The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.’—(Luke 16:16)*



THE MAN CHRIST JESUS

These two statements of Christ are of great significance and deserve more attention than they typically receive in this discussion. They indicate that a dispensational transition was already under way during the First Advent. The Law and the prophets had a specific terminus—John the Baptist. From John’s ministry onward, a new dispensation was commencing: the preaching of the Kingdom of God, the call to repentance, the offer of forgiveness on the basis of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. The moral content of the Law was not abolished—Christ came to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17), and his response in John 8 is shown in Section 7 (Objection VI) to be precisely a fulfilment, not a violation, of that Law—but the rigid penal application of the Mosaic code was being superseded by an administration of mercy, repentance and grace. To demand that Christ, in the midst of this dispensational transition, act as a civil executioner of the Mosaic death penalty is to misunderstand the nature and purpose of his First Advent entirely.

### JOHN THE BAPTIST’S MINISTRY OF REPENTANCE—AND WHAT IT IMPLIES

John was sent ahead of Christ specifically to ‘prepare the way’—baptising the people as a symbol of repentance (Matthew 3:2, 11). Consider what this means in practice. Among those who came to John in repentance were, without doubt, individuals guilty of sins that the Mosaic Law would technically have punished with death—including fornication and adultery. Yet John baptised them. He did not first demand



that they submit to the civil penalties of the Law. He received them on the basis of genuine repentance of heart. This is not a fringe point. It demonstrates that a new administration of repentance and forgiveness—grounded in the sacrifice already being upon the altar—was fully operative alongside—and in practice superseding—the strict penal mechanism of the Law, even before Christ’s own ministry began in earnest. If adulterers and fornicators could approach John for baptism as a symbol of repentance, and be received, on what basis is it maintained that Christ—who came not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17)—would have been obligated to demand the death penalty in every case of adultery he encountered? The question answers itself.

#### THE CESSATION OF THE *SOTAH* TRIAL—A REMARKABLE PIECE OF EXTERNAL EVIDENCE<sup>88</sup>

The Talmud provides striking external confirmation of the breakdown of the Mosaic legal apparatus for adultery during precisely the period of Christ’s ministry. The *sotah*—the trial of a suspected adulteress by the bitter waters (Numbers 5)—was formally discontinued by Rabban Jochanan ben Zaccai,<sup>89</sup> who was alive and active during Christ’s lifetime. The relevant source is the Mishnaic tractate *Sotah* 9:9. The reason given for the discontinuation is significant: adultery had become so widespread that the trial was no longer workable. John Gill records:

‘When adulterers increased, the bitter waters ceased; and Rabban Jochanan ben Zaccai caused them to cease. . . He cited in vindication the passage in Hosea 4:14.’

—John Gill, *Exposition of the Entire Bible*, on John 8:7

Let this sink in for a moment. The formal legal mechanism for dealing with adultery under the Law of Moses had been officially suspended by Jewish religious authority—because adultery was so endemic that the mechanism had become unworkable. The *sotah* required the husband to be innocent; since adultery was widespread even among the religious leadership, the trial was discontinued. By the time of the incident in John 8, the Jewish legal system had already, in effect, ceased to prosecute adultery according to the Mosaic procedure. The scribes and Pharisees were not the upholders of a functioning legal system—they were representatives of a legal apparatus that had broken down from within.

The passage Rabban Jochanan ben Zaccai cited in vindication of discontinuing the trial was Hosea 4:14: ‘I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with harlots, and they sacrifice with ritual harlots.’ God himself, speaking through Hosea, had declared that he would not punish women for adultery when the men were equally guilty. This is a striking scriptural undergirding for precisely what Christ demonstrated in John 8: when those who sought to stone the woman were themselves guilty of the same sin, their accusation was without standing. The prophet Hosea had said as much centuries earlier.

Christ himself described that generation as ‘adulterous and sinful’ (Mark 8:38; Matthew 12:39). He was not speaking loosely. The Talmudic evidence confirms it. Gill further notes that the signs of the Messiah’s coming, according to Jewish tradition, included the house of assembly becoming ‘a brothel house’. These were the men seeking to stone the woman of John 8. The irony is considerable.

#### ROMAN LAW HAD SUSPENDED JEWISH CAPITAL JURISDICTION

Quite apart from the internal breakdown of Jewish legal mechanisms, Roman imperial law had explicitly removed from the Jewish courts the authority to carry out capital punishment without Roman approval. This is not a matter of inference—John 18:31 records the Jews themselves acknowledging to Pilate: ‘It is not lawful for us to put any man to death.’ This was the legal reality of Christ’s entire ministry. A stoning carried out without Roman

<sup>88</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ordeal\\_of\\_the\\_bitter\\_water](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ordeal_of_the_bitter_water)

<sup>89</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yohanan\\_ben\\_Zakkai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yohanan_ben_Zakkai)

authority would have been an illegal lynching—and Christ, who in Luke 12:13–14 explicitly declined to act as a civil judge (*‘Who made me a judge or a divider over you?’*), would not have sanctioned one. His response to the accusers was therefore not a circumvention of the Law but a legally and historically accurate navigation of the real conditions that prevailed. Do we see Jews stoning adulterers to death today? No. And they were not doing so in Christ’s day either—at least not lawfully.

#### CHRIST’S CONSISTENT PATTERN—MERCY, REPENTANCE, AND FORGIVENESS

Throughout his ministry, Christ’s consistent approach to sinners was not to demand the application of Mosaic penalties but to call individuals to repentance, expose sin gently but honestly, and extend forgiveness on the basis of his atoning work. Consider the evidence from passages no one disputes. The sinful woman of Luke 7:36–50—described in commentary as a harlot, ‘deeply penitent’—wept at Christ’s feet. He did not berate her, demand she face any legal consequence, or refuse her his mercy. He forgave her sins.



Pastor Russell’s notes on this passage are instructive:

*‘On the strength of his covenant and sacrifice he had authority to tell the woman that her sins were forgiven, because he was making the Atonement which would be applicable to her. . . The ransom price for the sins of the whole world was already on the altar.’*

—Pastor C. T. Russell, *ZION’S WATCH TOWER*, R5033: 168.

This is theologically important. Christ’s ability to forgive sins during his earthly ministry—including grave sexual sins—rested on the fact that the ransom price was effectively already being laid down. He was, in Pastor Russell’s

words, ‘in the very act of paying the ransom-price’ (R324:4). The forgiveness extended to the sinful woman of Luke 7 was not lawless—it was grounded in the atoning work Christ was in the process of accomplishing. The same theological basis applies equally to the woman of John 8.

Then there is the Samaritan woman of John 4. Christ knew she had had five husbands and was living with a man who was not her husband—she was, in effect, living in adultery at the time of the conversation. Yet he did not accuse her, did not demand she face any legal consequence, did not refuse to drink the water she drew for him. He engaged her with profound spiritual truth, gently exposed her situation, and left the matter to work upon her conscience. As Pastor Russell wrote: ‘It is not for us to break the hearts of those around us, but to find those who are broken-hearted.’ (R4130, page 41)



### THREE ENCOUNTERS—A CONSISTENT PATTERN, AND AN INSTRUCTIVE CONCESSION

It is worth drawing these three encounters together, because they form a pattern that bears directly on the question of John 8. In each case Christ knew the woman’s moral condition, did not demand legal consequences, gently exposed or addressed the sin, and left the woman with either an explicit or implicit call to repentance. Luke 7—the sinful woman who wept. John 4—the Samaritan woman living with a man who was not her husband. John 8—the woman accused of adultery. The moral structure of all three is the same.

What makes the Samaritan woman encounter particularly relevant here is what commentary on that passage concedes—even commentary that is sceptical of John 8. The sin in John 4 was not merely historical: the woman was living in an adulterous arrangement at the precise moment Christ spoke with her. She was not a reformed sinner looking back on past failings. She was a current adulteress. Christ knew this—he said so himself—and still he engaged her, honoured her with a profound conversation, and revealed himself to her as the Messiah. The explanation given for why Christ nevertheless engaged her is her heart condition: that it must have been right, whatever her outward circumstances.

Now consider the logic of that concession. If Christ’s engagement with a woman living in active adultery is explicable and acceptable on the grounds of her heart condition—if the operative principle is internal disposition rather than external legal status—then the same principle, applied consistently, is entirely adequate to explain the encounter of John 8. The woman there was accused of adultery; Christ neither confirmed nor denied the accusation in legal terms; he dealt with her accusers on the basis of their own guilt and with her on the basis of

her evident disposition—she addressed him as ‘Lord’, she did not flee, she stood and received his charge. If heart condition suffices to explain John 4, it suffices to explain John 8.

There is also an important point about repentance to be drawn from the comparison between Luke 7 and John 8. The Luke 7 woman wept openly—her repentance was visible and demonstrable, and the passage was therefore felt by early readers to be ‘safe’: no one would misuse a story in which repentance was so evidently present. Augustine’s explanation for why certain scribes removed John 8—that they feared it would be used to excuse adultery—rests implicitly on this contrast. John 8 was felt to be more dangerous precisely because the woman’s repentance was not so visibly on display. But this cuts both ways. It tells us that early Christian readers were comparing the two passages and treating both as known Gospel narratives. The removal of John 8 was not a verdict of spuriousness—it was a pastoral calculation by nervous scribes. And it confirms that the passage was well enough known and well enough established to be a target for deliberate removal, which is quite a different thing from never having existed.

The question, then, is not simply whether the scenario of John 8 is consistent with the letter of the Law of Moses. It is whether it is consistent with the character and method of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Gospels uniformly portray him. On that question, the evidence of Luke 7, John 4, and John 8 speaks with one voice.

#### JOHN 3:17—THE GOVERNING PRINCIPLE OF THE FIRST ADVENT

*‘For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.’*

**John 3:17**

This is not an isolated sentiment. It is the governing principle of Christ’s entire earthly mission—he came to call sinners to repentance (Matthew 9:13; Luke 5:32), not to act as an enforcer of the Mosaic penal code. The woman of John 8 received what Augustine so memorably described: the wretched one, and mercy. That is entirely consistent with who Christ was and why he came.



## 7. OBJECTIONS EXAMINED AND ANSWERED

The objections raised against the passage are worth taking seriously—some of them, at least on the surface, appear plausible. Each is examined below. It will be seen that none of them, individually or collectively, sustains the conclusion that the passage is spurious, let alone diabolically inspired.

### OBJECTION I: JOHN 7:53—‘EVERY MAN WENT UNTO HIS OWN HOUSE’ CANNOT BE TRUE DURING THE FEAST

*Objection—Frank Shallieu, New Testament Studies, on John 7:53*

‘This statement is not true. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with the Feast of Tabernacles, and it was now the last day of the feast (John 7:37). If the Jews went to their own houses, it means they returned to Galilee and other lands and could not possibly have been in Jerusalem for the rest of the feast.’

#### RESPONSE

This objection rests on a misreading of what ‘his own house’ means in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles. The feast required pilgrims to dwell in booths—temporary tabernacles erected throughout Jerusalem and on the surrounding slopes (Leviticus 23:42). These booths were their ‘houses’ for the duration of the feast. Pastor Russell’s own description of the feast (R2437) is vivid on this point: ‘*Every available spot inside Jerusalem, and in the hollows, and on the slopes around it, was covered with huts or tabernacles of wattled or interplaited twigs.*’ ‘Every man went unto his own house’, in this context, most naturally means every man returned to his own temporary lodging or booth for the night—entirely consistent with the feast still being in progress the following morning. This is precisely what one would expect after the heated exchanges and attempted arrests of John 7. The crowd dispersed to their various lodgings; Christ retired to the Mount of Olives; and early the next morning he returned to the Temple. There is no contradiction here—only a natural and realistic description of how the evening of a major festival concluded.

### OBJECTION II: THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES WOULD NOT HAVE BROUGHT A WOMAN INTO THE TEMPLE PRECINCTS

*Objection—Frank Shallieu, New Testament Studies, on John 8:6*

‘If the scribes and Pharisees were so fastidious as to require hands to be washed before eating, then surely they would not have brought a woman caught in the act of adultery (that is, not merely a reported matter) into the Temple.’

#### RESPONSE

This objection attributes to the scribes and Pharisees a degree of inward holiness that the Gospels consistently and explicitly deny them. Christ’s own assessment is on record in John 7:19: ‘*Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law?*’ Matthew 12:39 and Mark 8:38 describe that generation as ‘adulterous and sinful’—and, as the Talmudic evidence in Section 6 demonstrates, this was literally true, not merely figurative. John Gill shows that adultery was so widespread among the religious leaders that the formal trial of suspected wives had to be officially discontinued. Romans 2:22 directly accuses those who teach against adultery of committing it themselves.

External fastidiousness and internal immorality are not mutually exclusive—they are, in fact, the precise combination Christ repeatedly condemned: ‘*Ye are like unto whited sepulchres*’ (Matthew 23:27). These same men conspired to kill Christ within the Temple precincts (John 7:30, 32, 44), met with Judas in the Temple to arrange the betrayal, and brought false accusations against Stephen (Acts 6:13–14) and Paul (Acts 21:27–29). To suggest that bringing an accused woman before a teacher in the Temple courts was beyond what

they would do is giving them far more credit than the Gospel record warrants—as though they were inwardly holy.

### OBJECTION III: JESUS WOULD HAVE BEEN OBLIGATED TO UPHOLD THE MOSAIC PENALTY

*Objection—Frank Shallieu, New Testament Studies, on John 8:6*

‘Also, Jesus was sinless, which means he obeyed the Law perfectly. Therefore, if this account were true, he would have been obligated to agree to the stoning.’

#### RESPONSE

This is the strongest objection raised, and it deserves the most thorough treatment. It will be shown that it rests on several false premises—each of which is independently sufficient to answer it.

**Firstly: Roman law had removed capital jurisdiction from the Jewish courts.** John 18:31 records the Jews themselves acknowledging to Pilate: ‘It is not lawful for us to put any man to death.’ This was the legal reality of Christ’s entire ministry, not merely at his trial. A stoning without Roman authority would have been an illegal lynching. Christ—who explicitly declined to act as a civil judge in Luke 12:13–14—would not have sanctioned one. John Gill observes precisely that Christ ‘did not take upon him the judiciary power, with which they could accuse him to the Roman governor.’ Had he ordered the stoning, he would himself have been in breach of Roman law. This alone is sufficient to answer the objection.

**Secondly: Deuteronomy 22:22 requires both parties to be brought to judgement.** ‘Then they shall both of them die, both the man that lay with the woman, and the woman.’ The accusers brought only the woman. The male party was conspicuously absent. The legal proceeding was fatally defective from the outset—under the very Law the accusers claimed to be upholding. Christ, who knew the Law perfectly, would have recognised this immediately. The absence of the man may well be among the things he wrote in the dust.

**Thirdly: The witnesses were themselves guilty of the same sin—and the word ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361) confirms it.** Deuteronomy 17:7 required the witnesses to cast the first stone: ‘The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death.’ Christ’s challenge—‘he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her’—is not a vague appeal to universal human sinfulness. It is a precise legal challenge addressed to the witnesses, requiring them to be innocent of the very sin with which they charged the woman. The Greek word translated ‘without sin’—ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361)—is the key. Adam Clarke’s commentary on this word is worth quoting directly:

‘He that is without sin—ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361), meaning the same kind of sin, adultery, fornication, etc. Kypke has largely proved that the verb ἁμαρτανεῖν (*hamartanein*, G264) is used in this sense by the best Greek writers.’  
—Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible*, on John 8:7

Clarke is not offering a personal opinion. He is citing J. G. Kypke’s *Observationes Sacrae* (1755), a rigorous classical philological study that demonstrated from the usage of the best Greek writers that ἁμαρτανεῖν (*hamartanein*, G264)—the verbal root of ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361)—was regularly used to denote specifically sexual sin. On this philological basis, ‘he that is without sin’ means ‘he that is without this kind of sin’—adultery. John Gill’s commentary arrives at the same conclusion by a different route, noting

that Christ is addressing witnesses in a quasi-judicial proceeding and that the qualification is to their fitness to act in that specific capacity:

*‘Let him that is without sin among you; meaning, not that was entirely free from sin, in heart, in lip, and in life; for there is no such person. . . but that was without any notorious sin, or was not guilty of some scandalous sin, and particularly this of adultery; which was in this age a prevailing sin, and even among their doctors.’*

—John Gill, *Exposition of the Entire Bible*, on John 8:7

The Apostle Paul confirms that this was precisely the condition of the scribes and Pharisees: *‘Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery?’* (Romans 2:22). And the prophet Hosea, centuries earlier, had established the very same divine principle: God himself refused to punish women for adultery when their accusers were equally guilty (Hosea 4:14). Christ’s challenge was not a novelty—it was the application of a principle embedded in both the Law and the prophets. The accusers’ guilty departure confirmed that they knew it applied to them. As Gill observes, ‘perhaps none of those Scribes and Pharisees were free from it’—and the Talmudic evidence about that generation’s moral state confirms this was not an overstatement.

**Fourthly: The dispensational context.** As argued in Section 6, the Law and the prophets were ‘until John’ (Matthew 11:13; Luke 16:16). A dispensational transition was already under way. The new administration of repentance and forgiveness, inaugurated by John and fulfilled in Christ, was superseding the strict penal application of the Mosaic code. Adulterers and fornicators were receiving baptism from John as a symbol of repentance without first submitting to execution. Christ’s charge to the woman—‘go and sin no more’—is entirely consistent with this new dispensation.

**Fifthly: Christ did not contradict the Law—he applied it with precision.** It is worth quoting Gill’s conclusion in full, because it is directly to the point: *‘Though he passed no sentence upon the woman, and so took not upon him the judiciary power. . . he manifestly appeared to agree with Moses, that such an one deserved to be stoned; wherefore they could not charge him with being contrary to Moses.’* Notice that none of Christ’s accusers—those who had specifically come to find grounds to accuse him of violating the Law—actually accused him of it afterwards. These were the same men who accused Stephen of speaking against the Law (Acts 6:13) and Paul of teaching contrary to Moses (Acts 21:21). Had Christ genuinely contravened the Law on this occasion, they would certainly have used it. Their silence is itself evidence that his response was legally sound.

The passage does not contradict Matthew 5:17. It is not the destruction of the Law—it is its fulfilment.

**Sixthly: The Samaritan woman encounter—an instructive parallel from undisputed Scripture.** It is worth noting a point that arises directly from commentary on John 4. The Samaritan woman, at the time of her conversation with Christ, was living with a man who was not her husband—she was, in the plain sense of the word, an adulteress at that moment, not merely in her past. Christ knew this—he said so himself. Yet he did not berate her, did not demand she face any legal consequence, and did not refuse to speak with her. He engaged her with the most profound spiritual teaching in John’s Gospel and revealed himself to her as the Messiah. The explanation offered for this—including in commentary sceptical of John 8—is that ‘her heart condition must have been right’. If that principle governs Christ’s conduct in John 4, it governs his conduct in John 8. The argument that Christ was ‘obligated to agree to the stoning’ in John 8 cannot be sustained without equally condemning his conduct in John 4—which no one proposes to do.

OBJECTION IV: ‘HIDING EYES FROM SIN’—DOES CHRIST’S RESPONSE MAKE HIM COMPLICIT?

*Objection—Frank Shallieu, New Testament Studies, on John 8:7*

‘Under the Mosaic Law, if a person hid his eyes from a sin as serious as adultery, he was considered to be as guilty as the one who committed the act.’

RESPONSE

Christ did not hide his eyes from the sin. He explicitly acknowledged—as Gill’s commentary makes clear—that the woman’s conduct, if the charge was true, was deserving of stoning under the Law. He then applied that very Law with precision, requiring the witnesses to be innocent of the same sin before they could lawfully proceed. He charged the woman directly to ‘go and sin no more’. None of this is passivity. It is a masterly and legally exact engagement with every dimension of the situation—moral, procedural, and civil—that left both the accusers and the woman confronted with truth. There is no hiding of eyes here.

OBJECTION V: THE STATEMENT ‘WITHOUT SIN’ WOULD LOGICALLY HALT ALL RESPONSE TO ANY SIN

*Objection—Frank Shallieu, New Testament Studies, on John 8:7*

‘There is another fallacy with this supposed statement; namely, it would stop any criticism, for it implies that reacting to any sin—no matter how blatant—is a wrong attitude, since we are all sinners (Rom. 3:10). This spurious statement is a very nice way of telling others to keep quiet.’

RESPONSE

This objection mistakes a statement made within a specific legal context for a sweeping general principle—which it was never intended to be. The key is the Greek word ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361), and Clarke’s direct words are worth setting before the reader:

*‘He that is without sin—ἀναμάρτητος (anamartētos, G361), meaning the same kind of sin, adultery, fornication, etc. Kypke has largely proved that the verb ἁμαρτανεῖν (hamartanein, G264) is used in this sense by the best Greek writers.’*  
—Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible*, on John 8:7

This is not Clarke’s personal interpretation—it is grounded in J. G. Kypke’s classical philological research demonstrating that ἁμαρτανεῖν (*hamartanein*, G264) was regularly used by the best Greek writers to denote specifically sexual sin. The word therefore does not mean ‘he who has never committed any sin’—it means ‘he who has not committed this kind of sin’. The challenge is addressed to the accusers and witnesses in their specific capacity as those proposing to execute a sentence for adultery: they must themselves be innocent of adultery before they can lawfully proceed.

Bengel’s *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* makes the same point, noting that the challenge is addressed to those acting in a judicial and witness capacity in this specific matter. Meyer’s *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John* concurs, noting that ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361) here refers to freedom from the specific sin in question, not from sin in general—a reading supported by classical Greek usage. Three independent scholars of Greek, spanning the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, arrive at the same conclusion: the word is not about universal sinlessness but about specific guilt in the matter at hand.

The result confirms this reading perfectly. The accusers did not depart because they were imperfect in some general sense—everyone present was imperfect, including the disciples standing nearby, none of whom departed. They departed because they were guilty of the specific sin of adultery, making them

legally and morally unfit to serve as witnesses and first executors of the sentence in this particular proceeding. The statement did exactly what it was intended to do, nothing more and nothing less.

#### OBJECTION VI: THE PASSAGE WOULD ‘CONTRADICT AND DESTROY THE LAW’

*Objection—Frank Shallieu, New Testament Studies, on John 8:7*

‘In Matthew 5:17, Jesus said, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.” If the incident in the eighth chapter of John were authentic, it would contradict and thus destroy the Law.’

#### RESPONSE

As the responses above demonstrate, the account does not contradict or destroy the Law. Christ applied Deuteronomy 17:7 precisely. He acknowledged the woman’s conduct as deserving of stoning. He declined to act as a civil magistrate—which was not his office—and declined to sanction an illegal execution under Roman law. He charged the woman directly to repent. None of this destroys the Law. The Law’s underlying purpose was always the eradication of sin from the people. Christ’s response served that purpose more effectively than a legally-defective, Roman-prohibited, witness-disqualified stoning ever could have done. The scribes and Pharisees’ own departure in convicted silence was itself a more powerful application of the Law’s moral force than any stone.

#### OBJECTION VII: THE FEAST-DAY CHRONOLOGY CREATES A CONTRADICTION

*Objection—Frank Shallieu, New Testament Studies, on John 8:2*

‘John 7:37 said it was the eighth (or last) day of the Feast of Tabernacles. If Jesus had gone to the Mount of Olives to spend the night and the incident with the adulterous woman occurred the next day, the feast would have been over. This discrepancy proves that John 7:53 through 8:11 is spurious because John 8:12 continues on with Jesus’ words on the eighth (last) day of the feast.’

#### RESPONSE

Pastor Russell addressed the chronological question directly in R2437–2438, identifying a ninth day—the *Shemini Atzeret*, the ‘Feast of Joy for the Law’—as a solemn continuation following the eighth day proper:

*‘The ninth day, or day after the expiration of the eighth, which belonged to the “Feast of Tabernacles,” is a solemn day likewise, and is called, “The Feast of Joy for the Law”. . . . On this ninth day the custom of the Jews was to take all the books of the Law out of the chest, and to put a candle into it, in allusion to Prov. 6:23, and more particularly to Psa. 119:105.’*

—Pastor C. T. Russell, *ZION’S WATCH TOWER*, R2438, page 55

The events of John 7:53–8:11 most naturally occurred on this ninth day: every man to his booth, Christ to the Mount of Olives, and early the following morning back to the Temple. There is no discrepancy—only a narrative sequence across two days that makes complete sense once the existence of the ninth day is taken into account.

As for the ceremony of lights: it is argued that this ceremony on the eighth day provides the natural backdrop for ‘I am the light of the world’, and that the *pericope* therefore disrupts this connection. Consider, however, what it would mean if John 8:12 was spoken on the ninth day—the morning after the close of the light ceremony. The lights of the feast had been extinguished. The great golden lamps had

been put away.<sup>90</sup> Into that very absence, Christ stepped forward and declared: ‘I am the light of the world’. Is that not, in fact, the more resonant moment? The *pericope* does not destroy this thematic connection—it arguably deepens it considerably.

It should also be noted that removing the *pericope* creates its own narrative problem. John 7:52 ends mid-argument amongst Pharisees. John 8:12 begins with Christ teaching again in the Temple. The transition without the *pericope* is abrupt. With it, the narrative moves naturally and coherently through the close of the feast, the overnight retirement, and the following morning’s return.

#### OBJECTION VIII: JESUS COULD NOT HAVE WRITTEN IN A PAVED TEMPLE COURT

*Objection—Frank Shallieu, New Testament Studies, on John 8:6*

‘To do so would have been impossible, however, for he was in the Temple in a paved court. He usually taught in Solomon’s Porch, which was stone. Incidentally, paintings of this incident show its taking place by the seashore where there is sand. The spurious account itself denies this setting by saying that Jesus was in the Temple (verse 2).’

#### RESPONSE

This objection, as commonly presented, conflates two distinct claims that need to be examined separately: a linguistic claim about what the Greek word for ‘writing’ and the preposition ‘into’ require, and a factual claim about the nature of the temple pavement. Both claims, on examination, are weaker than they first appear.

#### The Greek: *katagraphein* and *eis tēn gēn*

The ordinary Greek word for writing is *graphein* (G1125). John 8:6 uses a compound form: *katagraphein* (κατέγραψεν). This compound has been seized upon by some as proof that the text requires writing *into* a surface—carving or scratching into hard stone—but this reading gets the argument precisely backwards. The verb *katagraphein* carries the sense of purposeful, deliberate inscription—to write down a record, specifically to register something against someone. The same Greek word is used in the Septuagint rendering of Jeremiah 17:13, where those who forsake the Lord shall be ‘written in the earth’. Far from creating a problem, this compound verb deepens the passage’s scriptural resonance: Christ was not doodling idly but inscribing a record, silently, in the earth—precisely as the prophet had declared the unfaithful would be written. An Armenian manuscript tradition preserved exactly this understanding, translating the passage as: ‘*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.*’ (David Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 99–100.) Whether or not that specific interpretation is accepted, the verb itself supports deliberate purposeful action, not a casual or impractical gesture.

The preposition is the second focus of the objection. The Greek reads *eis tēn gēn* (εἰς τὴν γῆν)—literally ‘into the earth’. The objection is that *eis*, as a preposition of directed motion or penetration, requires writing into rather than on a surface, and that a paved surface would make this impossible.

This is linguistically unsound. In Koine Greek, *eis* has a broad semantic range covering motion toward, contact with, and arrival at a surface—as well as literal penetration into it. The preposition denotes ‘the

<sup>90</sup> Mishnah, *Sukkah* 5:2–4. The text records four golden menorot in the Court of the Women, each fifty cubits high with four golden bowls at the top, and states that “there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not lit up from the light of the water-drawing.” Available at [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Sukkah.5.2](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sukkah.5.2).

point reached or entered, of place, time, purpose, result’—meaning that ‘direction toward’ and ‘surface reached’ are well within its range, without requiring literal penetration. When one writes on paper, one writes toward and onto its surface; the preposition *eis* captures this directionality without implying the finger is pressed through the material. Indeed, *eis* is used throughout the New Testament in contexts where no penetration is intended: Matthew 2:11—the wise men came ‘into the house’ (*eis oikian*), which simply means they entered it; the curtain of the Temple was torn ‘into two’ (*eis duo*, Mark 15:38). The preposition describes directed motion and the object reached, not necessarily deep physical penetration. No scholar of Greek proposes that Christ was required to drive his finger into solid stone.

Furthermore, the noun *gē* (γῆ)—‘earth, ground, soil, land’—does not specify a paved floor. In a courtyard context during a harvest festival, ‘the ground’ most naturally refers to the surface material underfoot: accumulated dust, grit, loose material, and the organic debris of eight days of festival activity by tens of thousands of pilgrims. This is the natural referent of *gē* in this setting, independent of whatever lay beneath it.

### **The archaeology: what the Temple courts were actually like**

Josephus is the primary ancient source for the Temple courts, and his testimony is explicit. In *Wars* 5.192 he stated that ‘those entire courts that were exposed to the air were laid with stones of all sorts.’ The open courts, including the Court of Women where the treasury was located, were indeed paved. This much is not in dispute, and the defence document has never suggested otherwise.

The critical question is what kind of paving—and here the archaeological evidence materially qualifies the picture. The Temple Mount Sifting Project has recovered over a hundred geometrically cut and polished stone tiles (*opus sectile*) (Snyder, Barkay, & Dvira, 2016). Analysis of these tiles suggests that the delicate polished pavement was most plausibly confined to the roofed porticoes and interior spaces, though the precise location remains a matter of scholarly discussion (Ritmeyer, 2016). The open courts, by contrast, were paved with large, thick slabs of local limestone—a relatively soft, porous material, very different from polished marble—as confirmed by surviving in-situ Herodian paving stones still visible on the Temple Mount today (Ritmeyer, 2016). Limestone paving of this kind is not a smooth, impermeable surface; it is uneven, with gaps and joints between slabs, and accumulates surface material readily.

After eight days of the Feast of Tabernacles—during which Leviticus 23:40 required pilgrims to carry palm fronds, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook—tens of thousands of people had been passing through the Temple courts with these organic materials. The booths erected throughout Jerusalem were constructed from the same plant matter. The surface of an open limestone court after such a festival would not have resembled a modern tiled floor. Dust tracked in from the surrounding city, debris from the booth-building materials, loose grit between the limestone slabs, and the general accumulation of eight days of dense foot traffic would together have provided ample surface material for writing with a finger.

Josephus himself, in *Wars* Book VI, records a Roman soldier slipping on the temple pavement during the siege of 70 A.D.—evidence that the surface was stone, not evidence that it was impractically smooth. A stone floor after eight days of festival use is a very different thing from a freshly laid polished surface. And writing in the accumulated surface material of such a floor—dust, grit, organic debris—is not the same as attempting to carve into polished stone.

### The deeper point: Jeremiah 17:13

The physical arguments, taken together, resolve the practical objection. But they should not be allowed to obscure the theological significance of what Christ was doing. Jeremiah 17:13 declares: ‘O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth.’ Christ’s writing in the dust was almost certainly a deliberate and visible scriptural allusion—a silent, living enactment of the prophet’s words, directed against those who, in seeking to trap him, had forsaken the very righteousness they claimed to uphold. The verb *katagraphein*—to write down a record—makes the allusion still more precise. This is not the kind of detail that a late forger would think to include. It is the kind of layered, allusive, quietly devastating scriptural gesture that characterises the authentic Christ of the Gospels throughout his ministry.

Albert Barnes adds a further practical observation: the act also demonstrated Christ’s deliberate unwillingness to pronounce a civil judgement—visually reinforcing the same principle he expressed verbally in Luke 12:13–14—buying time, reducing the tension around the accused woman, and redirecting the attention of the accusers from her to themselves.

## OBJECTION IX: ‘BEGINNING AT THE ELDEST’—SHALLIEU’S OBJECTION

### Objection—Frank Shallieu, *New Testament Studies*, on John 8:9

‘Verse 9 states, “They . . . went out one by one, beginning at the eldest.” This is too fictional to be credible. Did the scribes and Pharisees all stand there and inquire who was the oldest so that they could exit in this order? Of course not!’

### RESPONSE

Stating the matter that way does make the verse sound rather ridiculous—but that is not what the Greek says. Adam Clarke’s commentary is unambiguous: ‘Beginning at the eldest even unto the last—*ἀπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἕως τῶν ἐσχάτων*—from the most honourable to those of the least repute. In this sense the words are undoubtedly to be understood.’ The phrase means simply that those of greatest social standing—those with most to lose publicly—felt the conviction most keenly and left first. This is entirely natural human behaviour, requiring no contrived protocol of age-ordering whatsoever. The most senior figures, with the most at stake reputationally, departed first. One can picture it quite easily.

## OBJECTION X: THE WOMAN SHOWS NO REPENTANCE

### Objection—Frank Shallieu, *New Testament Studies*, on John 8:11

‘Here is another flaw, for nothing was said about the woman’s asking for forgiveness. There was just a blanket statement, “Go, and sin no more.” Nothing was said about her repentance, and repentance is essential in order for forgiveness to be extended.’

### RESPONSE

This objection, if pressed consistently, would create difficulties in other undisputed passages. The Samaritan woman expressed no formal repentance during her encounter with Christ. The man healed at Bethesda (John 5:14) received healing before being charged to ‘sin no more’. The sinful woman of Luke 7, though she wept, made no verbal profession of repentance before Christ forgave her sins. Christ consistently engaged with sinners before a formal verbal declaration of repentance—the charge to ‘go and sin no more’ in John 8:11 is itself a call to repentance and a direct moral injunction against the sin in question. The objection proves too much.

The Luke 7 comparison deserves particular attention. That woman wept openly—her repentance was visible and demonstrable. The woman of John 8 made no such visible display. This contrast is, in fact, the very reason Augustine gives for why certain scribes removed the John 8 passage: they feared it would be misused to excuse adultery, precisely because the woman’s repentance was not as unmistakably on display as in Luke 7. In Augustine’s words, they removed it ‘as if he who had said “sin no more” had granted permission to sin.’ Notice what this implies: the scribes who removed John 8 were comparing it with Luke 7 and finding it, by their nervous reckoning, the less ‘safe’ of the two. That is not a verdict of spuriousness. It is evidence that the passage was well-known, was being actively read alongside Luke 7, and was felt to be sufficiently established to be worth the trouble of deliberate removal. Passages that do not exist do not need to be suppressed.

Furthermore, the Samaritan woman’s repentance in John 4 was inferred rather than stated. Commentary on that passage describes the townspeople as perceiving she was ‘obviously deeply affected and repentant’—yet nowhere in John 4 does she make a formal verbal declaration of repentance. The repentance is read from her behaviour and her altered demeanour. If that standard of inference is acceptable for John 4, it is acceptable for John 8—where the woman addresses Christ as ‘Lord’, does not flee, and stands to receive his charge.

There is also an internal inconsistency in applying the repentance objection to John 8 whilst accepting John 4. Commentary on the Samaritan woman explicitly states that the woman ‘was a harlot—having had five husbands and now living with a sixth man’—and then explains Christ’s engagement with her on the grounds that ‘her heart condition must have been right’. If heart condition is the operative principle in John 4—permitting Christ to engage a current adulteress on the basis of her inward disposition rather than her external legal situation—then the same principle, applied consistently, is entirely adequate to explain the encounter of John 8. The woman there received Christ’s charge with evident sobriety, addressed him as ‘Lord’, and stands in the same position as the Samaritan woman: judged not by the external circumstances but by the inward disposition that Christ, who knew all men, could read perfectly well.

It is also worth considering the woman’s situation in John 8 specifically. She had been publicly dragged before a crowd and used as a pawn in a political trap. When her accusers fled one by one, convicted by an invisible hand, she was left standing alone before the Lord. She addressed him as ‘Lord’—not ‘teacher’, not ‘rabbi’, but ‘Lord’. That is not the response of an indifferent sinner. Gill concludes: Christ ‘called her to repentance, and, as the merciful and compassionate Saviour, gave her reason to hope pardon and eternal life.’

#### OBJECTION XI: THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES ADDRESS JESUS AS ‘MASTER’—SHALLIEU’S OBJECTION

*Objection—Frank Shallieu, New Testament Studies, on John 8:4*

‘On rare occasions, an individual who was seeking to trap Jesus addressed him as “Master,” but it would be incongruous for the scribes and Pharisees to do so as a group when they wanted to kill him. So here is still another flaw.’

#### RESPONSE

This argument would, if accepted, require the rejection of several other passages where the Pharisees use exactly the same form of address: Matthew 12:38; 22:15–16, 24, 36; Mark 12:14. Are all of these spurious because the Pharisees call Jesus ‘Master’? Evidently not. The title was a common courtesy—used in some

cases respectfully, in others with deliberate condescension or sarcasm. Its appearance in John 8:4 is entirely consistent with the broader Gospel portrait of these men. This is a very weak proof of spuriousness.

### SUMMARY OF OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

The following table provides a quick-reference overview of the eleven objections examined in this section, together with the primary grounds for each response and the principal evidence cited.

Objection	Response (summary)	Principal evidence
I. 'Every man went unto to his own house'—impossible during the feast	'Own house' means each pilgrim's booth or temporary lodging, not a permanent dwelling elsewhere	Leviticus 23:42; Russell R2437
II. Scribes and Pharisees would not bring a woman into the Temple	The Gospels and Talmud confirm these men were adulterous and hypocritical; outward fastidiousness and inward immorality are not mutually exclusive	John 7:19; Matthew 23:27; Mishnah <i>Sotah</i> 9:9; Hosea 4:14
III. Jesus would have been obligated to agree to the stoning	Six independent grounds: Roman capital jurisdiction; absent male party; disqualified witnesses; dispensational transition; fulfilment not destruction of Law; parallel of John 4. Also: the proceeding was entrapment, itself contrary to Deuteronomy 19:15–21	John 18:31; Deuteronomy 22:22; 17:7; 19:15–21; Clarke/Kypke on ἀναμάρτητος; John 3:17
IV. 'Hiding eyes from sin'—does Christ's response make him complicit?	Christ did not hide his eyes—he applied the Law precisely, disqualified the witnesses, charged the woman directly, and declined to sanction an illegal execution	Deuteronomy 17:7; Gill; Luke 12:13–14
V. The statement 'without sin' would logically halt all response to any sin	ἀναμάρτητος means 'without this kind of sin'—the challenge is addressed to witnesses in a specific legal capacity, not to all humanity in general	Clarke/Kypke; Bengel; Meyer; Romans 2:22; Hosea 4:14
VI. The passage would 'contradict and destroy the Law'	Christ fulfilled the Law precisely—Deuteronomy 17:7 applied, Roman law observed, witnesses disqualified; moral force of Law upheld more powerfully than a defective stoning could have done	Matthew 5:17; Deuteronomy 17:7; John 18:31

Objection	Response (summary)	Principal evidence
VII. The feast-day chronology creates a contradiction	A ninth day ( <i>Shemini Atzeret</i> , ‘Feast of Joy for the Law’) follows the eighth; the events span that transition naturally; removing the pericope creates its own narrative problem	Russell R2437–2438; Tabernacles typology (light/water)
VIII. Jesus could not have written on a paved Temple court	<i>Eis tēn gēn</i> means directed contact with the surface, not carving into stone; limestone paving after eight days of festival accumulates ample surface material; <i>katagraphēin</i> echoes Jeremiah 17:13	Josephus <i>Wars</i> 5.192; Temple Mount Sifting Project; Liddell-Scott; Parker 1997, pp. 99–100
IX. ‘Beginning at the eldest’ is too fictional to be credible	The phrase means from the most honourable to those of least repute—those with most to lose publicly left first; no contrived age-ordering required	Adam Clarke on John 8:9
X. The woman shows no repentance	Same standard applied to John 4 and Luke 7 would disqualify those undisputed passages; ‘go and sin no more’ is itself a call to repentance; she addressed Christ as ‘Lord’	John 5:14; Luke 7:36–50; John 4; Augustine <i>Tractatus</i> 33
XI. The scribes and Pharisees address Jesus as ‘Master’—incongruous	The Pharisees address Christ as ‘Master’ in multiple undisputed passages; the title was a common courtesy used also in hostile contexts	Matthew 12:38; 22:15–16, 24, 36; Mark 12:14

## 8. POSITIVE INTERNAL EVIDENCE FOR AUTHENTICITY

The case for the passage does not rest merely on answering objections. There is a body of positive evidence—internal, contextual, and literary—that points in the same direction.

### THE NARRATIVE COHERENCE OF JOHN 7–8

John chapter 7 closes with the dispersal of the crowd—every man to his own booth—and Christ retiring to the Mount of Olives. Chapter 8 opens with his return early in the morning. The *pericope* provides a natural and coherent sequence across two days. Without it, John 7:52 (a contentious exchange mid-argument amongst Pharisees) connects directly to John 8:12 (Christ teaching again in the Temple)—an abrupt and contextually awkward transition. Removing the *pericope* does not make the narrative flow more smoothly; it makes it less so.

Burgon pressed this point with characteristic force, and it deserves to be heard directly. Between John 7:37 and 7:52, two hostile parties crowded the Temple courts; some were for laying violent hands on Christ; the Sanhedrin

had assembled and was reproaching its servants for failing to bring him prisoner; a heated argument was in progress amongst the chief priests and Pharisees. The text then, in the manuscripts that omit the *pericope*, runs immediately to John 8:12: ‘Again therefore Jesus spake unto them, saying, I am the light of the world.’ Burgon’s question is unanswerable: how can the Evangelist have proceeded to those words from that scene, with no transition, no movement, no account of what happened in between? The reader is snatched from the middle of a hostile council chamber debate back to Christ teaching again in the Temple without a word of explanation. Such a rupture is not impressionistic writing; it is a wound in the narrative that the *pericope* exists to heal.

Particularly telling is the testimony of Karl von Soden<sup>91</sup>—the scholar who produced the most extensive study of the *Pericope Adulterae* in its manuscript tradition ever undertaken (*Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1902–10), and who did not himself accept it as genuine. Despite his rejection of the passage’s authenticity, von Soden’s evidential conclusions directly refute the most common critical argument against it. The argument—repeated by Metzger and others—is that the *pericope* was ‘a piece of floating tradition which circulated in certain parts of the Western Church’ and was subsequently ‘inserted into various manuscripts at various places’, with no fixed home. Von Soden’s research established the opposite. He showed that the usual location of the *pericope*—between John 7:52 and John 8:12—is also its original location. The manuscripts that place it elsewhere (after Luke 21:38 in the Ferrar group,<sup>92</sup> or at the end of John) are exceptions representing later displacement, not independent evidence of varied insertion. In his own words: ‘It has been established with certainty that the *pericope* was not intruded into the Four Gospels, perhaps in various forms, in various places. This hypothesis is already contradicted by the fixed place which the section has.’ And again: ‘In spite of the abundance of the variant readings, it has been established with certainty’ that the passage had a single original location, defended it against all attacks with varying success, and that the variant locations and readings are secondary developments. When the scholar who conducted the most thorough manuscript investigation of this passage—and who rejected it as non-Johannine—nevertheless demolishes the ‘floating tradition’ argument on purely evidential grounds, that concession carries considerable weight.

Von Soden also observed that the Ferrar group of manuscripts, which places the passage after Luke 21:38, derives from a single common corrupt archetype. Burgon had made the same point: ‘these four codexes are derived from a common archetype, and therefore represent one and the same ancient and, I may add, corrupt copy.’ A single corrupt archetype does not constitute independent evidence of alternative placement—it constitutes one divergent witness, not several.

The introductory verses of the *pericope* confirm this picture of a single original location. John 7:53—‘And every man went unto his own house’—describes the breaking up of the stormy council meeting that immediately precedes in John 7:45–52. John 8:1–2 explain what Jesus did in the interval and how he returned early the next morning to teach in the Temple. These three verses make contextual sense only in their current position. In every other location in which the passage appears—after Luke 21:38, or appended to the end of John—these introductory verses are contextually incoherent; they refer to events that in those alternative positions have not been described. This is not an ambiguous data point. It is direct internal evidence that the passage belongs where the overwhelming majority of manuscripts have always placed it.

#### THE TREASURY—THE COURT OF WOMEN

John 8:20 identifies the location of Christ’s subsequent teaching as ‘the treasury’. Vincent’s Word Studies, Jamieson-Fausset-Brown, and Adam Clarke all identify the treasury as situated within the Court of Women—the

<sup>91</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann,\\_Freiherr\\_von\\_Soden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann,_Freiherr_von_Soden)

<sup>92</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family\\_13](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_13)

precise area to which the woman could most plausibly have been brought. Jamieson-Fausset-Brown stated this directly: ‘This may confirm the genuineness of John 8:2–11, as the place where the woman was brought.’ Jesus taught here on other occasions (Mark 12:41). The incidental geographical detail of John 8:20, which coheres perfectly with the setting of the *pericope*, is characteristic of authentic historical narrative, not of forgery.

#### THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES—WATER, LIGHT, AND THE WOMAN

The Feast of Tabernacles provided the setting for chapters 7 and 8 of John, and the *pericope* sits at the exact structural centre of the two great ceremonies that defined that feast. The Feast of Tabernacles was organised around two daily rituals performed in the Temple courts: the water-pouring ceremony, in which water drawn from the Pool of Siloam was poured at the altar as a symbol of the outpouring of the Spirit, and the lamp-lighting ceremony, in which four enormous golden candelabra were lit in the Court of Women, illuminating the entire Temple Mount and much of the surrounding city. It is not coincidental that both of these ceremonies receive direct responses from Christ in John 7 and 8. John 7:37–39—‘if any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink’—is Christ’s response to the water-pouring ceremony. John 8:12—‘I am the light of the world’—is Christ’s response to the lamp-lighting ceremony, which took place in the very court where the encounter with the woman occurred. The *pericope* is therefore structurally sandwiched between these two great declarations. Christ’s response to the water rite announces himself as the source of living water; his response to the lamp-lighting announces himself as the light of the world. Between the two declarations stands the encounter with the woman—a woman received in mercy, freed from condemnation, and sent forward into life rather than death. The structural and typological coherence is exact: the light that illuminated the Temple courts during the feast is the same light that exposed the darkness of the accusers, saw the woman clearly, and directed her toward life. The lamp-lighting ceremony in the Court of Women is the natural context for a declaration of ‘I am the light of the world’—and the encounter that immediately precedes that declaration is the natural enacted illustration of what that light does in practice. A forger inserting twelve verses into this chapter would need to have understood this intricate typological structure and reproduced it seamlessly. That is not a plausible profile for an interpolation.

#### THEMATIC COHERENCE WITH JOHN 8:12 AND 8:15

The declaration ‘I am the light of the world’ in John 8:12 follows immediately after ‘go and sin no more’ in John 8:11. Without the *pericope*, this self-declaration follows the hostile council chamber exchange of chapter 7 and connects somewhat abstractly to a scene of teaching. With the *pericope*, ‘I am the light of the world’ functions as an almost final remark to the encounter just concluded: the light that had pierced the darkness of the accusers’ consciences, exposing them one by one until they fled; the light that had seen the woman clearly and without condemnation; the light that had guided her forward into a new life. The declaration interprets the encounter, and the encounter enacts the declaration. Remove the *pericope* and the declaration stands alone; include it and the declaration becomes the summation of what has just been witnessed. This kind of integral unity between narrative and theological statement is recognisably Johannine—it is precisely how John structures his Gospel.

Immediately following the *pericope*, Christ also declares: ‘I judge no man’ (John 8:15). Without the preceding encounter with the accused woman, this statement hangs somewhat loosely. With the *pericope*, it reads almost as a direct reflection on what has just occurred—a statement whose full resonance depends on the account that precedes it. Christ had just declined to act as judge and executioner of a woman brought before him in a quasi-judicial proceeding. ‘I judge no man’ is not an abstract theological claim when it follows that encounter; it is the governing principle of the First Advent stated in its living context. The removal of the *pericope* does not make the surrounding text flow more smoothly or think more clearly—it weakens it.

### THE ABSENT MAN—A LEGAL DEFECT IN THE ACCUSATION

Deuteronomy 22:22 requires both parties to be brought to judgement, and it is worth quoting the verse in full: ‘If a man be found lying with a woman married to an husband, then they shall both of them die, both the man that lay with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel.’ The accusers brought only the woman. The male party was absent. This was a fatally defective proceeding under the very Law the accusers claimed to be upholding—the Law explicitly requires that both parties be found and both be put to death. Christ, who knew the Law perfectly, would have been immediately aware of this fundamental defect. The absence of the man may well be among the things he wrote in the dust.

The Greek word translated ‘taken in adultery, in the very act’ in John 8:4 is *autophōros* (αὐτόφωρος)—a technical legal term drawn from classical Greek law, originally applied to the capture of a thief but by the first century used specifically for sexual offences committed in flagrante. Liddell & Scott define it as ‘caught in the very act’. Its use here is legally precise: *autophōros* capture is not merely accusation but apprehension during the act itself. Under Jewish legal tradition, this was the one circumstance most closely approximating the conditions under which capital punishment for adultery could be applied. But *autophōros* by definition requires two parties to be caught together in the act. The woman was brought; the man was not. Whatever the circumstances of the ‘capture’, the accusers had failed to produce both of the parties that the Law required—and had failed to do so in a case where the very terminology they used implied that both parties had been caught simultaneously. The legal defect in their proceeding was not merely a procedural nicety; it was a critical failure that any competent jurist in the first century would have recognised at once. The precision of this detail, embedded in a single Greek word, is exactly the kind of legally accurate specificity that authenticates rather than undermines the account.

### THE LEGAL PRECISION OF CHRIST’S RESPONSE

Deuteronomy 17:7 required the witnesses to be the first to cast the stone. Christ’s challenge directly and precisely invoked this requirement, demanding that the witnesses be innocent of the same sin before proceeding. The legal accuracy of this response is entirely characteristic of Christ’s authentic teaching method—always engaging the questioner on the questioner’s own terms, with a precision that left no opening for counter-accusation. There is a further legal dimension that is rarely noted: the entire proceeding was an act of entrapment, which was itself contrary to the spirit of Mosaic law. Deuteronomy 19:15–21 establishes that false or malicious witnesses—those who bring a charge for purposes other than genuine justice—bear the very penalty they sought to impose on the accused. The accusers were not seeking justice; they were, as John 8:6 explicitly states, seeking grounds to accuse Christ. A proceeding designed not to uphold the Law but to manufacture a charge against an innocent party was not a lawful proceeding at all, and Christ’s response, which exposed the accusers’ own guilt and caused them to withdraw, was the most precise possible application of the Law’s own provisions against the misuse of legal process.

### THE MEANING OF ἄΝΑΜΑΡΤΗΤΟΣ (ANAMARTĒTOS, G361)—‘WITHOUT SIN OF THIS KIND’

This point deserves particular emphasis, because it is often misunderstood in ways that affect both the objections raised against the passage and the general impression of Christ’s response. The Greek word translated ‘without sin’ in John 8:7 is ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361). It does not mean ‘without any sin whatsoever’. It means, in the context in which Christ uses it, ‘without sin of this particular kind’—that is, without the sin of adultery.

This is not a modern reinterpretation. It is the conclusion of classical Greek philological scholarship. Adam Clarke cites J. G. Kypke’s *Observationes Sacrae* (1755)—a rigorous study of New Testament Greek in light of

classical usage—as having ‘largely proved that the verb ἁμαρτανειν (*hamartanein*, G264) is used in this sense by the best Greek writers.’

Clarke’s own commentary states the point directly:

‘He that is without sin—ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361), meaning the same kind of sin, adultery, fornication, etc. Kypke has largely proved that the verb ἁμαρτανειν (*hamartanein*, G264) is used in this sense by the best Greek writers.’

—Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible*, on John 8:7

John Gill arrives at the same conclusion independently:

‘Let him that is without sin among you; meaning, not that was entirely free from sin, in heart, in lip, and in life; for there is no such person. . . but that was without any notorious sin, or was not guilty of some scandalous sin, and particularly this of adultery; which was in this age a prevailing sin, and even among their doctors.’

—John Gill, *Exposition of the Entire Bible*, on John 8:7

Bengel’s *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* confirms the procedural-legal reading, noting that the challenge is addressed to those acting in a judicial and witness capacity in this specific matter. Meyer’s *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John* likewise notes that ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361) here denotes freedom from the specific sin in question, supported by classical Greek usage.

The significance of this cannot be overstated. Once ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361) is correctly understood, the entire objection that Christ was establishing an unworkable standard—that only a sinless person may ever call out any sin—collapses entirely. He was doing nothing of the kind. He was invoking a specific legal and moral principle: that those who accuse another of adultery, and propose to execute the sentence as witnesses, must themselves be innocent of that adultery. This principle is embedded in the Law and the prophets. Hosea 4:14 states it: God himself refused to punish women for adultery when the men were equally guilty. Romans 2:22 repeats it in the New Testament context: Paul directly accuses those who condemn adultery of committing it themselves. Christ’s challenge in John 8 was not a novelty—it was the precise and devastating application of a principle that the accusers’ own tradition already contained. The fact that they left confirms that they understood it, and knew it applied to them.

#### THE ECHO OF JEREMIAH 17:13—AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *katagraphein*

Christ’s writing in the dust almost certainly echoes Jeremiah 17:13: ‘O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth.’ This is a silent, living enactment of the prophet’s words directed against those who, in seeking to trap Christ, had forsaken the righteousness they claimed to uphold. The scriptural allusion is precise and devastating—and it is reinforced by the Greek verb John uses for ‘wrote’.

The ordinary Greek word for writing is *graphein* (G1125). John 8:6 uses the compound *katagraphein* (κατέγραψεν)—a form that carries the specific sense of writing down a record against someone, registering something officially. This is precisely the same word used in the Septuagint rendering of Jeremiah 17:13, where the unfaithful are ‘written in the earth’. The linguistic connection between Christ’s action and the prophet’s declaration is not accidental. It is the kind of quietly layered scriptural precision that characterises the authentic Christ throughout his ministry, and that no later forger would have thought to engineer.

There is a second and deeper scriptural significance that confirms the Johannine character of this gesture. When Moses received the Law on Sinai, Exodus 31:18 records that the two tablets were ‘written with the finger of God’.

Christ writes with his finger in the earth—the finger of God, now manifest in the Son, writing not commandments on stone but silent judgement in dust. John’s Gospel is structured throughout by Moses typology: ‘For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ’. (John 1:17.) The Son, who is ‘the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his [the Father’s] person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (Hebrews 1:3), remains distinct from the Father, yet perfectly reflects His very being. The contrast is exact. Moses’ finger inscribed the Law on enduring stone; Christ’s finger inscribes a transient, unread record in perishable dust—and then, to the accused woman, offers not death but life. This is precisely the kind of typological depth that John deploys elsewhere—the bread of life superseding manna (John 6), the light of the world announced at the feast of lights (John 8:12), the good shepherd superseding the hireling. Punch, presenting his dissertation findings at the 2014 Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary symposium on the *Pericope Adulterae*, noted this Moses typology explicitly as evidence of the Johannine character of the passage: this is ‘just the sort of contrast with Moses that one might expect from John.’ The detail is not artfully devised—like unto a fable (2 Pet. 1:16); it is a cohesive theological design.

The objection sometimes raised—that writing in the ground was impossible on a paved temple surface, or that the Greek preposition *eis* (‘into’) requires carving into hard stone—is answered in full in the response to Objection VIII above. In brief: *eis tēn gēn* describes directed motion toward and contact with the ground surface, not penetration of solid stone; the Herodian temple courts were paved with large limestone slabs that accumulated considerable surface debris after eight days of festival; and the compound verb *katagraphein* describes the nature and purpose of the writing, not the physical medium required.

#### NO DISCERNIBLE MOTIVE FOR FORGERY

Invented passages typically serve a purpose—theological, apologetic, or ecclesiastical. This passage promotes no known heresy, serves no obvious liturgical agenda, and—as Augustine himself observed—was actually problematic to certain copyists precisely because it seemed to extend *too much mercy*. A forger seeking to insert a passage favourable to Christ would be unlikely to choose a narrative that some readers found theologically troubling. F. B. Meyer put it plainly:

*‘This passage has been the subject of much controversy, but there is no possibility of accounting for it except on the supposition that this incident really took place. It reveals in our Lord’s character such tenderness, wisdom, hatred of sin, and insight into the heart of man, that it is impossible to suppose that any evangelist could have invented the story.’*<sup>93</sup>

—F. B. Meyer, *Through the Bible Commentary*

That observation—that the passage reveals something about Christ that no forger could have constructed—is, in the end, one of the most compelling arguments of all.

#### THE JOHANNINE ASIDE OF JOHN 8:6—AND A CHALLENGE ANSWERED

One of the most precisely Johannine features of the passage is the authorial aside in John 8:6: ‘This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him’ (*touto de elegon peirazōn auton, hina echōsin katēgorein autou*). Alan Johnson, in his 1964 doctoral dissertation, drew attention to the fact that this construction—an explanatory aside by the narrator, typically introduced by *de*, a demonstrative, and a form of *legō*—is a distinctive and repeatedly documented Johannine feature. It appears in virtually identical Greek at John 6:6: ‘And this he said to

<sup>93</sup> F. B. Meyer, *Through the Bible Commentary*, on John 8:1–11. Available online at <https://bibleportal.com/commentary/section/f-b-meyer-s-through-the-bible-commentary/322798>.

prove him' (*touto de elegen peirazōn auton*). The two verses are grammatically identical, differing only in number because one refers to Christ's testing of Philip and the other to the scribes' testing of Christ.

This parallel was examined and disputed by Daniel Wallace, who argued that similar constructions appear in Matthew 4:3 and 19:3, and therefore that the feature is not distinctively Johannine. John Paul Heil<sup>94</sup> answered this objection directly and decisively: Wallace's Matthean examples are direct narrative statements, not authorial asides. The aside in John 8:6—like the aside in John 6:6—is a narrator's interjection explaining the hidden motive behind what has just been said or done. The Matthean examples contain no such interjection; they are straightforward narrative statements of fact. The distinction is precise, and the Johannine character of John 8:6 in this respect remains intact. Punch, in his doctoral research, confirmed this assessment, noting that the Johannine aside pattern in 8:6 is fully consistent with a recognised and repeated Johannine literary habit, and that the attempted rebuttal did not succeed in neutralising it.

### THE PROTOEVANGELION OF JAMES—EARLY INDEPENDENT TESTIMONY

A further witness to the early reception of Johannine material deserves mention. The *Protoevangelion of James*—a second century pseudepigraphal (or apocryphal) work, generally dated to the mid to late second century A. D.—is a text that demonstrably draws upon the canonical Gospels and presupposes their authority. While some earlier scholars, such as Zervos,<sup>95</sup> have argued that certain narrative elements in the work may preserve pre Gospel infancy traditions, the consensus—summarised by Punch—is that the *Protoevangelion* is a derivative composition whose narrative and theological framework presupposes the existence and authority of the canonical Gospels, including John. The direction of dependence therefore runs from John to the *Protoevangelion*, not the reverse.

This remains significant for the present discussion. A second century Christian author, writing within a generation or two of the apostolic age, composed a devotional narrative that assumes the canonical Gospels as its source material. This is entirely consistent with the *pericope* of the adulterous woman being part of the Gospel tradition well before Jerome, and with its circulation in Christian communities early enough to be known, echoed, or presupposed by later apocryphal writers.

It is also worth noting—briefly, since this is not primarily a technical linguistic discussion—that the passage exhibits characteristics consistent with John's Gospel elsewhere. The dramatic staging of the encounter, the use of direct dialogue, the focus on a named and geographically specific location, the confrontation between Christ and hostile religious leaders, and the pattern of Christ engaging a sinful individual privately after the public confrontation has resolved—all of these are recognisably Johannine. John's Gospel is notably interested in one-to-one encounters between Christ and individuals in morally complex situations: the Samaritan woman (John 4), the man at Bethesda (John 5), Mary Magdalene (John 20). The woman of John 8 fits this pattern naturally—and fits it in a way that would be remarkable for a later forger to reproduce so precisely.

The Samaritan woman encounter in John 4 is worth particular mention here. Commentary on that passage notes that Christ honoured the woman 'with a one-to-one conversation, whereas he often spoke to multitudes or to his disciples'—and observes that John specifically chose to record these rare private conversations, as he did with Nicodemus. The woman of John 8 receives exactly the same kind of private, one-to-one attention from Christ after the crowd has dispersed. The structural parallel between the two encounters—public setting, withdrawal of the crowd, private engagement, moral charge, departure—is entirely natural to the narrative. This is not the work

<sup>94</sup> <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=wndoRIMAAA&hl=en>

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.bloomsbury.com/au/author/george-t-zervos/>

of a later scribe embellishing the Gospel text; it is the recognisable hand of an author who had a consistent interest in how Christ dealt with individuals in private.

Particularly worth noting is the phrase ‘go and sin no more’ in John 8:11. The identical charge—‘sin no more’—appears in John 5:14, where Christ addresses the man healed at Bethesda: ‘Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.’ John 5:14 is a passage no one disputes. The appearance of this identical phrase in the same Gospel, in a similar context of Christ engaging privately with an individual after a public encounter, is a small but pointed piece of internal evidence. It is the kind of verbal echo one finds within an author’s genuine work—not the kind of detail a later editor or compiler would be likely to reproduce precisely.

One objection sometimes raised on stylistic grounds is that the word ‘scribes’ (γραμματεῖς, *grammateis*) appears nowhere else in John’s Gospel. This is true, and deserves a direct answer. The reason is straightforward: the *pericope* describes a quasi-judicial proceeding brought by scribes and Pharisees acting in a formal legal capacity—the only such event in John’s Gospel. The word appropriate to that unique situation naturally appears here and nowhere else. Its absence elsewhere in John reflects the absence elsewhere in John of such proceedings—not the hand of a different author.

The broader vocabulary objection—that the passage as a whole contains too many words not found elsewhere in John—has been examined systematically and found to prove far less than its proponents claim. Alan Johnson, whose 1961 doctoral dissertation at Dallas Theological Seminary examined the passage in full (*A Re-examination of the Pericope Adulterae, John 7:53–8:11*, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1961), published his statistical findings in the *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* in 1966, writing from Moody Bible Institute, Chicago.<sup>96</sup> He applied the same statistical criteria used against the *pericope* to other undisputed Johannine passages—and found that John 2:13–17, the cleansing of the Temple, performs considerably worse than John 7:53–8:11 by every measure. Punch confirmed and reproduced Johnson’s findings in his doctoral research.

A methodological point should be noted at the outset. G. Udney Yule, a professional statistician and reader of statistics at the University of Cambridge, demonstrated that at least 10,000 words are required to form any solid statistical basis for authorship (*The Statistical Study of Literary Vocabulary*, cited in Johnson, 1966). The *Pericope Adulterae* contains only 174 words. The statistical method is therefore operating far below the threshold at which it can yield reliable conclusions about authorship.

A brief note on Johnson’s categories:

- ‘Hapax in John’ means words appearing only once in John’s Gospel;
- ‘Hapax in the Synoptics’ means words not found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke;
- ‘Hapax in NT’ means words found nowhere else in the New Testament;
- ‘Hapax in Greek Bible’ means words found nowhere else in the Greek Bible;
- ‘Lukan preferred words’ means words occurring with notably higher frequency in Luke than in other Gospels;
- ‘Johannine preferred words’ means words occurring with notably higher frequency in John than in the Synoptics—the measure most directly relevant to assessing whether a passage is stylistically Johannine.

<sup>96</sup> [https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/files\\_JETS-PDFs\\_9\\_9-2\\_BETS\\_9\\_2\\_91-96\\_Johnson.pdf](https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/files_JETS-PDFs_9_9-2_BETS_9_2_91-96_Johnson.pdf)

In Defence of John 7:53–8:11

The comparison, set out in tabular form, is as follows:

Criterion	John 7:53–8:11	John 2:13–17
Total words	168	73
Total vocabulary	81	47
Hapax in John (%)	13 (16%)	14 (30%)
Hapax in Synoptics (%)	1 (1%)	3 (6%)
Hapax in NT (%)	4 (5%)	4 (9%)
Hapax in Greek Bible (%)	2 (2%)	4 (9%)
Lukan preferred words (%)	4 (5%)	2 (4%)
Johannine preferred words (%)	14 (17%)	4 (9%)

On every single measure, John 2:13–17 is more non-Johannine than John 7:53–8:11—higher hapax percentage, higher Lukan affinity, and less than half the proportion of Johannine preferred words. The *pericope*, by this standard, is the more Johannine of the two passages. Johnson’s conclusion is direct: ‘No one should feel compelled from statistical tabulations to exclude the *pericope* from the Gospel of John’ (*Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 9.2, 1966, p. 95). If the vocabulary objection were applied consistently, it would remove the cleansing of the Temple from the Gospel before it removed the woman taken in adultery. No scholar advocates this. The criterion is therefore not a principled one; it is applied selectively to passages already suspected on other grounds.

A second comparison makes the same point from a different angle. Johnson and Punch both note that John 4:4–16—the encounter with the Samaritan woman, the most structurally parallel passage to the *pericope* in the entire Gospel—contains eighteen words found nowhere else in John, including two absolute New Testament hapax: *sunchraomai* (to associate with) and *threma* (livestock). Nobody disputes John 4. The conclusion is the same: unusual vocabulary in a short Johannine passage is normal, not suspicious. Punch’s overall conclusion from his examination of both internal and external evidence was that the passage’s linguistic style supports Johannine authenticity, or at the least does not speak against it.

Johnson also identified a positive stylistic argument that has received insufficient attention. One of the unmistakable literary patterns of the Fourth Gospel is the practice of interjecting short explanatory phrases that interpret the significance of words just spoken in the narrative—introduced by the conjunction ‘now’ (δέ), the demonstrative ‘this’ (τοῦτο), and a form of the verb ‘to speak’ (λέγειν). This pattern occurs at least ten times in undisputed sections of John’s Gospel (6:6, 6:71, 7:39, 11:13, 11:51, 12:6, 12:33, 13:11, 13:28, 21:19) and is completely absent from the Synoptic Gospels. An exact duplicate of this pattern occurs in the middle of the *Pericope Adulterae* at John 8:6: ‘Now this they were saying tempting him, that they might have to accuse him’ (τοῦτο δὲ ἔλεγον πειράζοντες. . .)—with all three introductory elements present. Ernest Cadman Colwell, President of the Claremont School of Theology, confirmed in correspondence with Johnson (12 March 1964): ‘I certainly think

that what you have identified is an element of Johannine style in the sense of literary pattern in the Fourth Gospel.’ Johnson observed that this fact had been entirely overlooked: he checked twenty-five to thirty critical commentaries on John, including French and German works, and found complete silence on the point. This stylistic trait—first identified by Johnson in 1966—was subsequently the subject of debate between J. P. Heil and Daniel Wallace,<sup>97</sup> with Heil defending its evidential weight and Wallace challenging it. The exchange is significant: it confirms that the Johannine aside at John 8:6 is a serious piece of internal evidence, not a minor or marginal observation.

To this should be added a point about the narrative rupture that is sharpened beyond what Burgon observed. John 7:52 ends with the Sanhedrin debating amongst themselves—without Jesus present in the scene. John 8:12 opens with Jesus speaking to them and the crowd. This is not merely an atmospheric break; it is a character presence discontinuity. Jesus is absent in 7:52 and present in 8:12, with no account of his return. The *pericope* (John 7:53–8:2) provides exactly that account: the crowd dispersed, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives, and early the next morning he returned to the Temple. Without it, a reader would not merely find the transition abrupt—they would have no information about how Jesus came to be present at all in the scene that follows. The insertion theory requires us to believe that a later scribe constructed twelve verses that happen to repair, with surgical precision, a character presence discontinuity that would be invisible to anyone who had not read the passage without them. That is not the profile of an insertion. It is the profile of original material.

Zane Hodges<sup>98</sup> and Arthur Farstad,<sup>99</sup> textual scholars who approached the manuscript evidence with rigorous scepticism, arrived at the same conclusion from the internal side. After examining the contextual and stylistic compatibility of the *pericope* with the Tabernacles Discourse, they stated plainly: ‘If it is not an original part of the Fourth Gospel, its writer would have to be viewed as a skilled Johannine imitator, and its placement in this context as the shrewdest piece of interpolation in literary history’ (*The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text*, Thomas Nelson, 1985, p. 25). The cumulative weight of contextual compatibility, stylistic integration, narrative function, and verbal parallels with undisputed Johannine passages makes the idea of a later insertion require a forger of extraordinary—indeed, implausible—sophistication.

## 9. PASTOR RUSSELL AND THE PASSAGE



For those within the Bible Student tradition, what Pastor Russell made of this passage is directly relevant. It is therefore worth noting—and noting carefully—that in multiple published writings, spanning both the WATCH TOWER reprints and the canonical volumes of STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES, Russell treats the passage as authentic Scripture without any qualification or caveat whatsoever.

One preliminary observation should be made in the interests of full honesty. In his own published writings of the 1880s, Russell endorsed the Sinaitic, Vatican, and Alexandrine manuscripts as ‘the very best authority’ for the New Testament text (ZION’S WATCH TOWER, R434), and the WATCH TOWER of the same period published Tischendorf’s extended argument for the priority of these three manuscripts approvingly (R1144). It is therefore accurate to say that Russell’s published position on the manuscript question aligned with the Alexandrian stream rather than the Majority Text tradition. This makes his acceptance of the *pericope* all the more significant: here was a man who regarded Sinaiticus and Vaticanus as the foremost manuscript authorities, and who nevertheless

<sup>97</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel\\_B.\\_Wallace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_B._Wallace)

<sup>98</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zane\\_C.\\_Hodges](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zane_C._Hodges)

<sup>99</sup> [https://textus-receptus.com/wiki/Arthur\\_Farstad](https://textus-receptus.com/wiki/Arthur_Farstad)

cited John 7:53–8:11 as genuine Scripture without caveat or qualification across decades of published writing. The manuscript question, for Russell, was evidently not decisive on this passage—and that is itself a meaningful observation for those who follow his method.

#### THE NEW CREATION—VOLUME 6 OF STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES

Perhaps the most significant of all the Russell references is one found not in a WATCH TOWER article but in Volume 6 of STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES—The New Creation—the volume carrying the greatest doctrinal weight of all his writings for Bible Students. In Study IX, ‘The Judgment of the New Creation’ (pages F405–F406), Russell is developing his teaching on the Law of Love and the spirit of the fallen nature that delights in condemning others. He contrasts this with the spirit of the Lord Jesus, and reaches directly for the *Pericope Adulterae* as his primary illustration:

*‘As our noble, loving Master declared on one occasion, when asked to condemn a sinner: “Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone.” The person without frailties of his own might be to some extent excusable for assuming unbidden of the Lord the position of executioner of justice—taking vengeance on wrongdoers, exposing them, etc.; but we find that our Master, who knew no sin, had so much Love in his heart that he was disposed rather to condone and forgive than to punish and expose and berate.’*

—Pastor C. T. Russell, *STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES*, Vol. 6, *The New Creation*, Study IX, pp. F405–F406

Several things deserve attention here. Firstly, Russell quotes John 8:7 directly and without any caveat, as an authoritative saying of ‘our noble, loving Master’—placing it on precisely the same level as any other authoritative saying of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels. Secondly, he draws a specific theological inference from the incident about the character of Christ: that he ‘who knew no sin’—and who therefore could have cast the first stone had he chosen—deliberately declined to do so, out of love. It is worth noting that Russell’s use of the word ‘condone’ here clearly means to show compassion rather than to excuse or approve of sin—the entire passage is about the Law of Love producing mercy rather than harsh condemnation, not about indifference to wrongdoing. The very next sentence in his argument is that Christ was ‘disposed rather to condone and forgive than to punish and expose and berate’—the contrast is with punishment and exposure, not with moral standards. Thirdly, this passage appears in one of the six canonical volumes of STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES—not a periodical article but a work intended as a permanent doctrinal resource. Its appearance there without any textual qualification is a witness of the highest order for this audience.

There is also a specific point here that adds to the response to those who argue Christ would have been ‘obligated to agree to the stoning.’ Russell’s observation is that Christ ‘knew no sin’ and therefore, if anyone could have cast the first stone, it was he—and he chose not to. This is not a failure of legal obligation. It is the supreme expression of the Law of Love by the one person who had every right to apply the Law in full and declined to do so. Russell’s reading of the passage directly answers the objection.

#### ZION’S WATCH TOWER—R3434

In his article ‘*Sons and Daughters of Consolation—Comfort*’ (R3434, page 291), Russell holds up the account as a primary illustration of the compassionate character of Christ:

*‘Note the case of the woman taken in sin, and our Lord’s failure to make any pharisaical tirade against her. Mark his reproof to those who stood by: “He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone.” Mark how, when they were all thus convicted of imperfection in some particular themselves, our Lord said to the woman, “Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more.” (John 8:3–11.)’*

—Pastor C. T. Russell, *ZION’S WATCH TOWER*, R3434, page 291

There is no asterisk here. No note of caution. No suggestion that the passage is textually uncertain. Russell uses John 8:3–11 as a straightforward, authoritative illustration of the character of the Lord Jesus—the very character that his followers are called to emulate. The witness is clear.

#### **R5095—THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST’S MINISTRY**

In R5095, Russell summarises the spirit of Christ’s ministry in words that draw unmistakably on John 8:11: *‘He was not forever blaming them for not keeping the Law, but, on the contrary, He was continually expressing sympathy for them in their weaknesses, and helping them out of them and encouraging them to “go and sin no more.”*’ That phrase—‘go and sin no more’—is used as a characterisation of the whole of Christ’s earthly ministry, drawn directly from the language of the *pericope*. Russell plainly regarded it as expressive of who Christ was.

#### **R2437–2438, R5033, R1921, R4130**

In R2437–2438, Russell’s detailed account of the Feast of Tabernacles—including his identification of the ninth day, the *Shemini Atzeret*, as a solemn continuation—provides the chronological framework that resolves the feast-day objection. In R5033 and R1921, his notes on the sinful woman of Luke 7 establish the theological basis on which Christ could extend forgiveness during his earthly ministry: the ransom price was already effectively on the altar. And in R4130, his discussion of the Samaritan woman demonstrates Christ’s consistent pattern of gentle engagement with those in morally compromised situations—a pattern entirely consistent with what is described in John 8.

In short: Pastor Russell accepted the *pericope* as genuine across multiple works spanning decades of ministry. He used it doctrinally in the canonical volumes of *STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES*. He used it pastorally in the *WATCH TOWER* reprints. He resolved the main chronological objection, supplied the theological basis for Christ’s forgiveness, and identified the spirit of the passage as quintessentially expressive of the Law of Love that Christ embodied. Those within the Bible Student tradition who dismiss this passage are, on this point at least, departing from the Pastor’s guidance.

## **10. A SURVEY OF COMMENTARY WITNESSES**

The following commentators, spanning several centuries, are among those who engage positively with the passage or whose observations bear directly on the evidence. It is worth noting how consistently the classical commentators—far from dismissing the passage—find it theologically coherent and legally precise.

#### **DIDYMUS THE BLIND OF ALEXANDRIA (C. 313–398 A. D.)**

Didymus, head of the Alexandrian catechetical school and one of the most learned Greek biblical scholars of the fourth century, explicitly knew and commented on the passage. His commentary, discovered in the Tura papyri in 1941, states: *‘We find in certain gospels a woman who had sinned, accused before the Lord, and was sent away’* (*Commentarii in Ecclesiasten*, 223.6–13). His witness is particularly valuable as an early Alexandrian Greek—not Latin—patristic testimony, from the very city where Sinaiticus and Vaticanus originate, countering the suggestion that the Greek tradition was universally silent on the *pericope*.

#### **JEROME (C. 347–420 A. D.)**

Jerome’s direct testimony in *Adversus Pelagianos* 2.17 (c. 415 A. D.) is worth citing precisely: *‘In Euangelio secundum Iohannem in multis et Graecis et Latinis codicibus inuenitur de adultera muliere, quae accusata est apud Dominum’*—‘The story of the adulterous woman who was accused before the Lord is found in many Greek and many Latin

manuscripts of the Gospel of John.’ He also uses the passage as an authoritative text against the Pelagians—something no careful scholar would do with a text of genuinely doubtful authority.

**PACIAN OF BARCELONA (C. 310–391 A. D.)**

Pacian, writing against the rigorist Novatians around 370 A. D., appeals directly to the *pericope* as a recognised Gospel authority: ‘Choose not to read in the Gospel that the Lord spared even the adulteress who confessed, when none had condemned her’ (Letter 3, *Against the Novatians*).<sup>100</sup> His appeal assumes his opponents also know the passage—it is a shared reference, not a novelty. This is an independent fourth-century Spanish witness, separate from both the North African and Italian traditions.

**JOHN CALVIN (1509–1564)**

Calvin is worth noting precisely because his acceptance of the passage is honest and careful—he does not pretend the textual question does not exist, but having weighed it, he accepts the passage for use. His exact words on John 8:3 are: ‘It is plain enough that this passage was unknown anciently to the Greek Churches; and some conjecture that it has been brought from some other place and inserted here. But as it has always been received by the Latin Churches, and is found in many old Greek manuscripts, and contains nothing unworthy of an Apostolic Spirit, there is no reason why we should refuse to apply it to our advantage.’ (Commentary on John, on John 8:3.) This is a measured verdict from a Reformer with no interest in defending spurious texts—and his conclusion is that the passage should be received and used.

**ADAM CLARKE (1760–1832)**

Clarke’s commentary is among the most legally precise available, and his observation on ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361) is the cornerstone of the document’s response to several objections. He establishes through citation of J. G. Kypke’s classical philological research that ‘he that is without sin’ refers specifically to the same kind of sin—adultery—not to general sinlessness: ‘He that is without sin—ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361), meaning the same kind of sin, adultery, fornication, etc. Kypke has largely proved that the verb ἁμαρτανειν (*hamartanein*, G264) is used in this sense by the best Greek writers.’ This is grounded in demonstrable classical Greek usage, not in personal theological preference. Clarke also clarifies that ‘beginning at the eldest’ means from the most honourable to the least, and identifies the treasury as located in the Court of Women, directly corroborating the plausibility of the setting.

**JOHN GILL (1697–1771)**

Gill provides the crucial Talmudic evidence about the cessation of the *sotah* trial, confirms the endemic nature of adultery among the religious leadership of that generation, and demonstrates that Christ’s challenge—‘he that is without sin’—refers specifically to freedom from adultery, not from sin in general: ‘meaning, not that was entirely free from sin. . . but that was without any notorious sin, or was not guilty of some scandalous sin, and particularly this of adultery.’ He demonstrates that Christ’s response was a precise application of Deuteronomy 17:7, and concludes that Christ neither connived at the sin nor abrogated the Law, but ‘called her to repentance, and, as the merciful and compassionate Saviour, gave her reason to hope pardon and eternal life.’

**JOHANN ALBRECHT BENDEL (1687–1752)**

Bengel’s *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*—one of the most respected works of New Testament philology—supports the procedural-legal reading of ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361), noting that Christ’s challenge is addressed to those acting in a specific judicial and witness capacity in this matter, not to all human sinners in general. His

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<sup>100</sup> See p. 28 of this document for a variation.

concurrence with Clarke’s reading, from within a rigorous German Protestant philological tradition, adds independent weight to the argument.

**HEINRICH AUGUST WILHELM MEYER (1800–1873)**

Meyer’s *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John*—a work of exacting philological precision—likewise confirms that ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G361) in John 8:7 denotes freedom from the specific sin in question, not from sin in general, and that this reading is supported by classical Greek usage. Meyer’s concurrence is significant because he was one of the most rigorous philologists of the nineteenth century and not a man given to doctrinally motivated readings.

**ALBERT BARNES (1798–1870)**

Barnes explains Christ’s writing in the dust as a deliberate demonstration of his unwillingness to act as a civil judge—a pattern consistent with Luke 12:13–14. His commentary is careful and practically-minded, and is helpful on several of the more concrete objections raised against the passage.

**MATTHEW HENRY (1662–1714)**

Henry’s commentary on the Samaritan woman (John 4) demonstrates the pattern of Christ’s gentle but honest engagement with women in morally compromised situations—not accusing directly but pointing to the truth and leaving it to work on the conscience. This pattern is entirely consistent with what is described in the *pericope*, and Henry’s observation that Christ ‘doth not call her strumpet, but tells her, He with whom thou livest is not thy husband: and then leaves it to her own conscience to say the rest’ is instructive.

**JAMIESON, FAUSSET AND BROWN**

Their commentary on John 8:20 makes the geographical connection explicit: ‘*This may confirm the genuineness of John 8:2–11, as the place where the woman was brought.*’ This is a straightforward statement from a major reference commentary that the internal evidence of the passage supports its authenticity.

**VINCENT’S WORD STUDIES**

Vincent identifies the treasury as situated in the Court of Women—providing independent geographical corroboration for the setting of the encounter.

**F. B. MEYER (1847–1929)**

As quoted in Section 8 above, Meyer concludes that the passage cannot be accounted for except by the supposition that the incident really took place—citing the tenderness, wisdom, and insight into human nature that it reveals as beyond the capacity of any evangelist to have invented.

**DEAN JOHN WILLIAM BURGON (1813–1888)**

Burton’s *The Causes of the Corruption of the Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels* (posthumous, ed. Edward Miller, 1896) remains the most substantial defence of the passage within the Majority Text tradition. His *The Revision Revised* (1881) is equally essential—it provides the most thorough scholarly critique of the two manuscripts (Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) upon which the dismissal of the passage chiefly rests, documenting their internal corruption in statistical detail and characterising the critical elevation of those two manuscripts as a superstition that he described as ‘blind’. Burgon personally collated both manuscripts and knew his subject at first hand. His work is essential reading for anyone wishing to pursue this subject seriously.

## II. CONCLUSION

It is a very serious matter to dismiss any portion of Holy Scripture as spurious. It is a far more serious matter to attribute it to an evil spirit. The evidence assembled in this document—manuscript, patristic, historical, legal, literary, theological, and contextual—does not support the dismissal of John 7:53–8:11 as spurious. It emphatically does not support the suggestion that it is of diabolical origin. These suggestions were the occasion for this document; it is submitted that the evidence gathered here shows such suggestions to be without foundation, and that those who make them, in respect of John 7:53–8:11, take upon themselves a weight of responsibility the evidence does not justify and that this document has endeavoured to show is not warranted.

The manuscript case against the passage, when examined with precision rather than deference to critical fashion, resolves into this: the passage is absent from the Alexandrian stream—a geographically localised tradition centred in Egypt, represented primarily by two manuscripts whose textual character has been sharply disputed by scholars such as Burgon and Hoskier—and present in the Antiochian stream overwhelmingly, across 90% or more of all surviving Greek manuscripts, the full Byzantine lectionary tradition, the Old Latin versions, and the Latin Vulgate. The theoretical underpinning of the Alexandrian priority—Westcott and Hort’s ‘Neutral text’ hypothesis—has been substantially abandoned by mainstream critical scholarship itself. The modern critical committee that produced the text most widely cited against the passage assigned it a {C} rating: considerable doubt. Even the primary Alexandrian manuscripts contain internal markers—umlauts in both Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, anomalies in P66—showing their scribes were aware of the passage’s existence. The scribe of Sinaiticus was documented to have committed the commonest of all copyist errors—omission—no fewer than 115 times in the New Testament alone. And the principal objector’s own handling of that manuscript, as examined in Section 2, is methodologically inconsistent: Sinaiticus is treated as unreliable when it contradicts a doctrinal position, and its corrector’s marks are treated as decisive when they appear to support one. That inconsistency applies directly to the objections in Section 7, and the reader is entitled to weigh it.

The objections raised against the passage, when examined carefully, are answerable—each of them. The feast-day objection is resolved by Pastor Russell’s own identification of the ninth day, the Feast of Joy for the Law. The ‘obligated to stone’ objection is resolved on six independent grounds—Roman law, the absent male party, disqualified witnesses, the dispensational transition, the fulfilment rather than destruction of the Law, the parallel of John 4—with the further observation that the entire proceeding was an act of entrapment contrary to Deuteronomy 19:15–21, which the accusers had already violated before Christ spoke a single word. The ‘without sin’ objection is resolved by Adam Clarke’s citation of Kypke’s classical philological research—ἀναμάρτητος means ‘without sin of this kind’—confirmed by Gill, Bengel, and Meyer. The writing-on-the-ground objection is resolved by the physical reality of the Temple courts, the Armenian manuscript tradition, and the scriptural echo of Jeremiah 17:13. The vocabulary objection is refuted statistically by Johnson and Punch: John 2:13–17 performs worse than the *pericope* on every metric; John 4 contains eighteen hapax including two absolute New Testament hapax. The ‘no repentance’ objection proves too much, disqualifying undisputed passages by its own logic. The Jerome/Roman Catholic origin claim is refuted by Papias, the *Didascalia*, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Pacian, Ambrose, and Augustine—all independent witnesses predating or contemporary with Jerome. And the manuscript case against the passage rests on a critical theory that Canon Cook—an independent Church of England scholar whose work on the Revised Version was entirely separate from Burgon’s—described as ‘entirely destitute of historical foundation’, and that Scrivener, who sat on the Revision Committee itself, described as ‘*destitute not only of historical foundation but of all probability.*’

The positive evidence is substantial. The Feast of Tabernacles provides not merely a backdrop but an exact typological framework: Christ's response to the water-pouring ceremony (*'if any man thirst, come unto me'*) and his response to the lamp-lighting ceremony (*'I am the light of the world'*) bracket the encounter with the woman precisely—the *pericope* is structurally the enacted fulfilment of the declaration that immediately follows it. Burgon's narrative rupture argument is unanswerable: John 7:52 ends in the middle of a hostile council chamber debate; John 8:12 opens with Christ teaching again—with no transition, no movement, no account of how he came to be there. The *pericope* supplies exactly that account. Von Soden—who rejected the passage's authenticity—demolished the 'floating tradition' argument on purely evidential grounds: the passage had a single fixed original location, and the variant placements are secondary. Hodges and Farstad, approaching the evidence without confessional sympathy for the passage, stated that if it were not original, its composer would have to be regarded as a Johannine imitator of implausible skill, and its placement *'the shrewdest piece of interpolation in literary history.'* Hilgenfeld and Steck—hostile critical scholars—conceded that deletion through moralistic nervousness was the more credible explanation than scribal insertion. Didymus the Blind knew and cited the passage in Alexandria, in the same century as the manuscripts that omit it—direct evidence that the Alexandrian omission was scribal-liturgical, not a reflection of ignorance. The Harclean Syriac deliberately reintroduced the passage from the Greek Antiochian stream, confirming it was known and recognised as belonging to the authentic text. The Pauline principle that doctrine must be tested against Scripture, not Scripture bent to serve doctrine, applies with equal force to the proposed alternative reading of Revelation 20:7 that underlies one of the key objections—a reading that rests on a corrector's mark unattested in any other manuscript, in a suffix usage unattested anywhere in the Greek language, which the Codex Sinaiticus Project's own scholarly edition does not support.

It is also worth noting, in the context of the manuscript argument, what lies behind the critical tradition that has shaped the modern dismissal of this passage. The Greek text underlying the *Emphatic Diaglott*—which played a foundational role in the early Bible Student movement—was that of Griesbach, who could examine Codex Vaticanus only under strict supervision, without writing materials, committing its readings to memory and recording them later from memory. The Westcott-Hort system that subsequently elevated Vaticanus to near-supreme authority was built upon a genealogical theory that Westcott and Hort's own colleagues on the Revision Committee—including Scrivener—regarded as 'destitute not only of historical foundation but of all probability.' These are not peripheral considerations. They bear directly on the authority that has been accorded to the two Egyptian manuscripts whose omission of the passage is the primary basis for its dismissal.

And the pattern of three encounters—Luke 7, John 4, John 8—speaks with one voice. In each case Christ knew the woman's moral condition, declined to demand legal consequences, gently addressed the sin, and left her with an explicit or implicit call to repentance. That pattern is recognisably, consistently, authentically Christ. A forger would need to have understood the entire Johannine portraiture of Christ's character, the legal framework of first-century Judaea, the Talmudic history of the *Sotah* trial, the geography of the Temple courts, the Tabernacles typological framework, the nuance of Deuteronomy 17:7, and the echo of Jeremiah 17:13—and to have woven all of these into twelve verses that fit their narrative context more organically than the surrounding text does without them. That is not the profile of a forgery. It is the profile of authentic history.

Above all, the passage is consistent—deeply, naturally consistent—with the dispensational context of Christ's ministry, with the new administration of mercy, repentance, and grace inaugurated by John the Baptist, with the theological reality that the ransom price was already being laid on the altar, and with the governing principle of the First Advent that Christ himself stated: *'God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.'* (John 3:17)

Charles Taze Russell—who in his own published writings of the 1880s endorsed Sinaiticus and Vaticanus as ‘the very best authority’ for the New Testament text, and who was therefore no uncritical defender of the Majority Text tradition—nevertheless cited John 7:53–8:11 as genuine Scripture without qualification or caveat across decades of published writing, used it doctrinally in the canonical volumes of *STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES*, drew from it the governing principle of the Law of Love, and answered questions about the related chronology consistently with the plain reading of the passage. That is not the behaviour of a man who regarded these twelve verses as spurious, still less as diabolically inspired.

Pastor Russell, opening his article ‘*Sons and Daughters of Consolation—Comfort*’ (*ZION’S WATCH TOWER*, R3434), reflected on the surname given to Joses by the Apostles: ‘*Barnabas; which is, being interpreted, the son of consolation [comfort] (Acts 4:36)*’—and observed that to bear such a name tells ‘*a whole volume in itself respecting the general character of the person.*’ From that starting point he drew from Christ’s conduct in John 8 a broader lesson about the spirit that should characterise the Lord’s people: that the measure of growth in grace is the capacity to be sons and daughters of consolation—comforters rather than condemners—and that ‘*those who are making greatest progress in this direction, as comforters in Zion, are growing most in grace*’ (R3434:293). He drew the same lesson from Christ’s gentle dealings with Peter after the denial—noting that ‘*so far as the record shows, our Lord did not once mention to Peter either his profanity or his disloyalty*’, and that the nearest approach to reproof was the quiet inquiry, ‘*Lovest thou me?*’—holding both accounts up as illustrations of the one consistent spirit. His closing appeal to the brethren was to unity, peace, and brotherly kindness: ‘*Let us more and more be worthy of the name Barnabas—Comforter of the brethren. . . that we may be all sons and daughters of comfort in Zion, representatives of our Father, and channels of the holy Spirit*’ (R3434:296). To attribute the passage that Russell held up as the primary illustration of that principle to diabolical origin is, in the light of his own teaching, a position without foundation. The article repays careful reading in full. In a spirit of genuine fraternal concern, and not of controversy, it is submitted that the wiser and more scripturally consistent course is to receive this passage as what the great majority of the Christian tradition—including Pastor Russell himself, across multiple canonical works—has always regarded it to be: **an authentic and precious portion of the inspired Word of God.**



*‘There remained two: the wretched one and mercy.’*  
—Augustine of Hippo, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus*



‘He that is without sin—ἀναμάρτητος (*anamartētos*, G<sub>361</sub>),  
meaning the same kind of sin,  
adultery, fornication, etc. Kypke has largely  
proved that the verb ἁμαρτανειν (*hamartanein*, G<sub>264</sub>)  
is used in this sense by the best Greek writers.’

—Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible*, on John 8:7

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