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**Is John 7:53-8:11 Originally Part of the Gospel of John? An Examination of the Evidence
from the Manuscripts and Early Church Fathers**

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IS JOHN 7:53-8:11 PART OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN?

One of the most extensively discussed passages in New Testament scholarship is John 7:53-8:11 and the question of whether it was written by the author of the Gospel of John or someone else. If this pericope about the adulterous woman is part of the original text of John, then why is it omitted by some of the oldest, most important manuscripts?¹ This pericope is mentioned in the Greek Church Fathers, but is it the version we have recorded in the gospel of John, or is it different?² And why is this passage, at times, recorded in different locations in the Gospels?³ It is my objective to show, based on the evidence presented in the manuscript tradition and Church Fathers' references, that this pericope is an interpolation and not part of the original text of the Gospel of John.

MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

In 1971, B. Metzger published a commentary on textual passages in the Greek New Testament.⁴ In this book he wrote a section on the pericope of John 7:53-8:11. He listed the majority of manuscripts that do not contain this pericope.⁵ The list included four of the earliest,

¹ B. Metzger provides the list of manuscripts that omit this pericope. Four of the oldest he mentions are “𝔓^{66,75} κ B.” See B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, UBS (1971): 219-20.

² B. Ehrman argues that Didymus the Blind may have known and used more than one source in his telling of this pericope. See B. Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” *NTS* 34, no. 1 (1988): 24-44 (25-30).

³ The different locations for this pericope are after Luke 21:38; John 7:36, 7:44; or 21:25. For a discussion on the different locations, see D. Carson, “Excursus: The Woman Caught in Adultery (7:53-8:11),” D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 333-7.

⁴ For much of what follows, I am indebted to Metzger and his work found in B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, UBS (1971): 219-22.

⁵ The list of manuscripts which omit the pericope which Metzger notes: “𝔓^{66,75} κ B L N T W X Y Δ Θ Ψ 0141 0211 22 33 124 157 209 788 828 1230 1241 1242 1253 2193 al,” *Ibid.*, 220. According to Nestle et al., there are additional manuscripts which omit the pericope: “131. 565...1333. 1424^{txt}. 2768. a f1 q sy sa ly pbo bo^{pt}; Or

most important manuscripts: “ $\text{P}^{66,75}$ & B.”⁶ He also included Codices A and C.⁷ Metzger cites what he believes to be the only Greek Church Father reference to the pericope, by Euthymius Zigabenus in the “twelfth century.”⁸ According to Metzger, “Euthymius declares that the *accurate copies* (emphasis mine) of the Gospel do not contain it [the pericope].”⁹ Metzger concludes that he thinks the pericope is “a piece of oral tradition which circulated in certain parts of the Western church and which was subsequently incorporated into various manuscripts at various places.”¹⁰

Z. Hodges wrote an article in 1979 in which he disagreed with Metzger’s claim that the pericope is not original to the Gospel of John.¹¹ He argues the age of the pericope by citing G. D. Kilpatrick: ““the vast majority of deliberate changes in the New Testament text were older than AD 200.””¹² Hodges therefore claims that it would be “highly improbable” for the pericope to be later than AD 200.¹³ He then moves into a discussion of the earliest witnesses, which omit the pericope. He argues that the four 3rd century manuscripts (P^{66} , P^{75} , & B), which are from Egypt, may all share the same parent manuscript. He also notes that we have only recovered a small number of manuscripts which likely existed. He therefore suggests that it is possible that the majority of manuscripts in the 3rd century may have had the pericope, while it was left out of these four manuscripts from Egypt. Hodges then turns to the Church Fathers, arguing that they

Hier^{mss.}” See, Nestle et al., *Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus*, ed. Barbara Aland et al., 28. revidierte Auflage. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 322.

⁶ Ibid., 219.

⁷ Metzger notes with these two codices, however, are defective in this section of John. But based on the amount of space where the codices are defective, it does not appear that the pericope would have fit in the defective space, Ibid., 220.

⁸ Ibid., 220.

⁹ Ibid., 220.

¹⁰ Ibid., 220-1.

¹¹ For much of what follows, I am indebted to Z. Hodges and his work found in Z. Hodges, “The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11): The Text,” *BSac* 136 (1979): 318-32.

¹² G. Kilpatrick as qtd in Ibid., 321.

¹³ Ibid., 321.

did in fact regard the pericope as an authentic story that was originally part of John. He cites “Jerome (ca. 420),” “Augustine (ca. 430),” and “Ambrose (ca. 397).”¹⁴ Jerome makes mention of this story and states that it is found “in the Gospel according to John in many manuscripts, both Greek and Latin.”¹⁵ Hodges claims that Jerome would have traveled and known of many manuscripts that now do not exist. If he believed the story was authentic, then it ought to give great validity to the story’s authenticity. Augustine and Ambrose both claim that the pericope poses a danger of misunderstanding and being misused by those who do not fully understand it. Augustine believes the pericope has been removed from some manuscripts because some people were afraid that it would give their wives “‘impunity in sinning.’”¹⁶ Ambrose says that the pericope could give people anxiety since Jesus seems to be dismissing a case of adultery without punishment.¹⁷ These statements from the Church Fathers, especially Augustine, suggest that perhaps the reason that the pericope is not found in some manuscripts is not because of a textual question of authenticity but rather because of a negative impact it may have on some who misunderstand the passage’s meaning and therefore use it as license to sin.

D. A. Carson, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, discusses Hodges’ claims.¹⁸ He argues that the pericope is found “in most of the medieval Greek minuscule manuscripts, but they are absent from virtually all early Greek manuscripts...representing great diversity of textual traditions.”¹⁹ He also mentions other translations from antiquity which do not have it, such as

¹⁴ Ibid., 328-31 (330-1).

¹⁵ Ibid., 330.

¹⁶ Augustine as qtd in Ibid., 331.

¹⁷ Ibid., 331.

¹⁸ For much of what follows, I am indebted to D. A. Carson and his work found in D. Carson, “Excursus: The Woman Caught in Adultery (7:53-8:11),” D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 333-7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 333.

Syriac, Coptic, Old Latin, Old Georgian, and Armenian.²⁰ He notes that “all the early church Fathers omit this narrative: in commenting on John, they pass immediately from 7:52 to 8:12” and “no Eastern Father cites the passage before the tenth century.”²¹ According to Carson, even some of the later manuscripts put an asterisk next to the pericope, suggesting that the scribes were unsure of its authenticity. Another aspect of the manuscript evidence that Carson points to is that the pericope appears in different locations, such as after Luke 21:28; John 7:36, 44; or 21:25. Carson states, “the diversity of placement confirms the inauthenticity of these verses.”²² Carson goes on to say that the pericope itself looks more like a Lukan story than a Johannine one. One piece of evidence for this claim is that some of the words which are found in the pericope occur predominantly in Luke-Acts. The first word is “ὅπθεος” (John 8:2) and is only found in two other locations: Luke 24:1 and Acts 5:21. The second is “λαός” (John 8:2) and is found one hundred and forty-two times in the New Testament. Of those one hundred and forty-two times, eighty-four of them are found in Luke-Acts. Based on the manuscripts, ancient translations, shifting locations, and verbiage within the pericope, the evidence appears to point towards this being an interpolation rather than an authentic part of the Gospel of John.

EVIDENCE FROM CHURCH FATHERS: TWO FORMS OF THE PERICOPE?

While Carson disputes the authenticity of the pericope in the gospels, he does suggest that the story itself may be a true, historical account of an act of Jesus, noting that Papias refers

²⁰ Ibid., 333.

²¹ Ibid., 333. For a refutation of this point, see Hodges, “The Woman Taken in Adultery,” 329-30.

²² Ibid., 333.

to it.²³ Keener, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, agrees with Carson that “this passage bears all the marks of an interpolation” and that “the story may reflect an authentic tradition about Jesus,” suggesting it may be “from oral tradition.”²⁴ B. Ehrman published an article in which he discussed the Church Fathers’ understanding of the pericope.²⁵ While Metzger, in 1971, made reference to Euthymius Zigabenus’s quotation concerning the accuracy of the manuscripts that do contain the pericope (see above), Ehrman, in 1988, writes that there has been new found evidence of a commentary by Didymus the Blind.²⁶ Didymus, in his comments on Eccl. 7:21-2a, references the pericope. Ehrman notes that Didymus cites the pericope as being found “in certain gospels.”²⁷ Ehrman then discusses what this phrase may mean. Did he mean “in some *manuscripts*” or “in certain books which contain Gospels”?²⁸ When Ehrman examined the details in Didymus’ version of the story, he noted that while the details that Didymus gives seem to have nothing to do with the text in Ecclesiastes he is commenting on, the pericope in the context of John 7-8 makes perfect sense for his discussion. In John 7, the author of John contrasts “judg[ing] according to appearance” and “righteous judgement.”²⁹ In 7:20-2 and 7:50-2, Jesus’ opponents are judging by appearances instead of with “righteous judgment.” Therefore, when the pericope is understood in this context, the woman is deserving of punishment *in appearance*, but the crowd who brought her to Jesus are not judging her with “righteous judgment” because they too are guilty of “comparable sins.”³⁰ Her sin is not against

²³ Ibid., 333-4. Carson notes that this story is “reported by Papias (and recorded by the historian Eusebius, *H. E.* III. xxxix. 16),” Ibid., 334.

²⁴ C. Keener, “Condemning a Sinner’s Accusers (7:53-8:11),” D. A. Carson et al (eds.), *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Company, 2003), 735-8 (735-6).

²⁵ For much of what follows, I am indebted to B. Ehrman and his work found in B. Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” *NTS* 34 (1988): 24-44.

²⁶ B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 220.

²⁷ Didymus the Blind as translated and qtd in B. Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 25.

²⁸ Ibid., 26.

²⁹ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Jh 7:24.

³⁰ B. Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 28.

them but against God. Thus only God can judge her. Therefore, they are breaking Jesus' command in 7:24. The point that Didymus is making is that Christians should not judge certain types of sins.³¹

Ehrman also discusses the source(s) that Didymus may have used for his version of the pericope. Didymus says, ““ἐν τισιν εὐαγγελίοις”” (“in certain gospels”).³² As noted above, Ehrman thinks it is likely that Didymus knew the traditional location of the pericope in the Gospel of John. However, did he know or use any other sources? The only other Gospel source that has been found which contains the pericope is “the Gospel according to the Hebrews.”³³ Ehrman notes that Didymus used the Gospel according to the Hebrews in his commentary on the Psalms. While discussing the superscription of Psalm 33, he discusses the times in the Bible in which people have more than one name. He asserts that Levi (from the Gospel of Luke) and Matthias (from Acts) are the same person. “This identification, Didymus states, is supported by the Gospel according to the Hebrews: ἐν τῷ καθ' Ἐβραίους εὐαγγελιῳ τοῦτο φαίνεται (PsT 184.10).”³⁴ Ehrman goes on to state: “Thus Didymus had read the Alexandrian Gospel according to the Hebrews and considered it a reliable source (although he does not quote it as Scripture).”³⁵ Therefore, it seems probable that if the pericope is included in the Gospel according to the Hebrews, Didymus would have known that version as well. This makes sense because some the details in the story told by Didymus are not shared with the version found in the Gospel of

³¹ B. Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” 28.

³² Didymus as qtd in Ibid., 25.

³³ Ibid., 29.

³⁴ Ibid., 30.

³⁵ Ibid., 30.

John.³⁶ Thus, “he [Didymus] tells the story as it was apparently recounted in the Gospel according to the Hebrews, yet seems also to have known it in its Johannine context.”³⁷

Another early Christian document that Ehrman discusses is the Didascalia. It also contains the pericope. However, it contains details that Didymus does not give! Both sources give accounts of what appears to be the same story yet provide very different details. Why? Ehrman questions if there were not “two originally distinct stories which were conflated into the traditional version of the PA only after they had circulated independently in different Christian communities.”³⁸ If so, understanding these different versions as different stories conflated into one would help with understanding them.³⁹ Ehrman goes on to state that the form of the story by Didymus must represent the story of the Gospel according to the Hebrews and “this account does not bear the marks of historical authenticity. The scene appears contrived and Jesus’ words have an unrealistically immediate and striking effect.”⁴⁰ Ehrman turns to the Didascalian story and observes that it seems more authentic. One piece of evidence he points to is that the act of penance had “very early became an overriding emphasis in ecclesiastical discipline.”⁴¹ He goes on to state that since the adulteress is pardoned without the need for penance, it seems more likely that this story is not contrived by Christians at a later time but rather an early account of an action of Jesus. How then did these two stories conflate and enter the Gospel of John? Perhaps because of the similarities the two stories hold, over time they slowly merged until eventually a

³⁶ For a comprehensive analysis, see Ibid., 31-4.

³⁷ Ibid., 37.

³⁸ Ibid., 34. Note: “PA” in Ehrman’s article is an abbreviation for the name of the pericope: “*pericope de adultera*,” Ibid., 24.

³⁹ Ehrman notes: “Such a hypothesis would go a long way toward explaining some of the passage’s previously insoluble enigmas...for example, whether in the traditional story the woman had been condemned already by the Jewish authorities (in Didymus’s version she has, in the Didascalia she has not),” Ibid., 34.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁴¹ Ibid., 36.

‘final merge’ occurred and then was inserted into the New Testament.⁴² Based on the evidence from the Church Fathers, the pericope seems more likely to be an interpolation in the Gospel of John.

ANALYSIS

In my research into the evidence for or against the authenticity of the pericope of the adulterous woman in the Gospel of John, I found the arguments and evidence supporting its status as an interpolation to be more persuasive. Although Hodges disputed the claims of pro-interpolation scholars by reexamining the manuscripts themselves, his arguments were not as helpful as those of Metzger, Carson, Keener, and Ehrman. Perhaps the four Egyptian manuscripts ($\beta^{66,75}$ & B) did all come from the same parental source, but the list of manuscripts found in Metzger and NA28 seems to suggest that even if this claim was true, the other early witnesses still point to it being an interpolation.⁴³

I found Hodges’ citations of Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose to be helpful. I find his comments about Jerome to be the most helpful. Perhaps Jerome did find the pericope in other manuscripts while he traveled. However, we do not have any evidence of these manuscripts. The earliest manuscript we have which contains the story are from c. 5th century.⁴⁴ We are therefore unable to confirm Hodges’ assertion. If Hodges’ claim is true that most interpolations in the New Testament are from AD 200 or earlier, then it is possible that the pericope was inserted into the

⁴² Ehrman notes in a footnote on this point: “The final conflation was made, no doubt, in order to give a fuller account of Jesus and the adulteress,” Ibid., 44. For a discussion on the stories’ similarities and differences, see Ibid., 34-8.

⁴³ Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 219-20. Nestle et al., *Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus*, 322.

⁴⁴ This is manuscript D. Nestle et al., *Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus*, 322.

text before these three Church Fathers lived.⁴⁵ Another claim that Hodges makes is that the reason some of the manuscripts lacked the pericope was because, in Augustine's and Ambrose's day, some were afraid of its potential social consequences. It seems reasonable to assume that Hodges is correct.⁴⁶ However, that is not the only reason why some were, and still are, weary of this passage. In antiquity (as noted above) some of the later manuscripts had an asterisk besides the pericope because the scribes were unsure if it was authentic to the Gospel of John. Today, the oldest manuscript that we have, according to NA28, which does include the pericope, is from c. 5th century.⁴⁷ However, our earliest manuscript is Ψ^{66} and it does not contain the pericope. Based on the evidence we have, from between the time of Ψ^{66} and Ψ^{75} (3rd century) and when these Church Fathers lived (late 4th to 5th century), something must have happened.⁴⁸ Taken together with Ehrman's evidence for two distinct stories that may have been conflated into one, this leads me to be persuaded that the passage is an interpolation. It may have been a story (perhaps two conflated into one) that was not original to the Gospel of John, but was added later (perhaps due to it being an oral tradition), probably in the century (or centuries) leading up to Jerome's day. Thus, the manuscript evidence and evidence from the Church Fathers, as I found them in my research, seem to lend their support to this passage being an interpolation.

⁴⁵ Hodges' claim is built upon a quote from G. Kilpatrick. See Hodges, "The Woman Taken in Adultery," 321. For the dating of these three Church Fathers, see Ibid., 328-31 (330-1).

⁴⁶ Specifically, as noted before, that wives might abuse this text to sin without consequence, Ibid., 331.

⁴⁷ Nestle et al., *Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus*, 322.

⁴⁸ The date for Ψ^{66} is "about 200" and the date for Ψ^{75} is "early third century," See K. Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975), 15. For the dates for when these three Church Fathers lived, see Hodges, "The Woman Taken in Adultery," 331.

CONCLUSION

There is more to be discussed with this passage, such as the internal evidence (which poses its own set of questions). However, based on my research, I believe that the pro-interpolation view is the more probable conclusion according to the external evidence. Perhaps there are manuscripts as early as Ψ^{66} and Ψ^{75} which do contain the pericope. However, we have yet to uncover them. Metzger, then, appears to be correct: It is “a piece of oral tradition which circulated in certain parts of the Western church and which was subsequently incorporated into various manuscripts at various places.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 220-1.

Biography

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