

Does the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53–8:11) Have Canonical Authority? An Interconfessional Approach

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The historicity of the event that the pericope adulterae (John 7:53–8:11) relates has not been disproved. The orthodoxy of the words of Jesus it contains also cannot be denied. If the canonicity of the pericope is determined according to the same historical and content-related criteria that the ancient church applied during the development of the canon of Scriptures, then nothing speaks against its canonical status. This sort of assessment does not rest on an infallible and therefore binding decision of the church or its magisterium or on an internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. When the pericope adulterae is accepted into the NT, it should not be placed between chaps. 7 and 8 of the Gospel of John because it is not part of the original text of this book. Rather, it should be put after John's Gospel, because it probably comes from the same historical root. Those who hesitate to accept the pericope adulterae as canonical can remove it from the NT without having to fear a serious loss. Everything the pericope has to say is also expressed several times in other places of the biblical canon. The additional benefit of the narrative of Jesus and the adulteress is not some singular ethical or theological statement. Its particular value lies in the fact that the pericope presents the forgiveness offered by Jesus to those who are condemned to death by the Mosaic law in a more elaborate, more colorful, and more pointed way than any other passage of the NT.

Key Words: canon criteria, Gospel of John, ecclesial infallibility, New Testament canon, pericope adulterae, testimonium spiritus sancti internum

The pericope adulterae (PA) probably should be regarded as a secondary addition to the Gospel of John.¹ It may be the case that its Greek style does not deviate as clearly from the rest of the Gospel as Robert Morgenthaler

1. The pericope's textual originality has been defended by, among others, J. W. Burgon, *The Cause of the Corruption of the Traditional Text of the Holy Gospel* (Cambridge: Deighton, 1896) 249–79; Z. C. Hodges, "The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11): The Text," *BibSac* 136 (1979) 318–32; P. H. R. van Houwelingen, *Johannes: Het evangelie van het Woord* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1997) 421–30.

and others have asserted. And it is also true that the pericope contains several typically Johannine stylistic peculiarities.² But all in all, internal and external evidence taken together cast doubt on the literary originality of the PA.³ In contrast to the evangelists' narratives contained in the appendix of the book (John 21:1–23), which were likely not written or dictated by the author himself but added by one of his disciples who edited the Fourth Gospel,⁴ the PA was probably inserted after the publication of the book. The narrative of the adulteress (John 8:2–11) was likely added by an interpolator between the late second and the early fourth century. This interpolator probably also composed John 7:53–8:1 as a narrative transition in order to connect the PA with its Gospel context. While for a very long time parts of the Greek-speaking church read the Fourth Gospel without the PA, in the Latin church it became a part of John's Gospel around the fourth century.⁵

The answer to the question of the PA's canonicity does not follow automatically from a literary historical judgment about its origin. Some theologians conclude from a negative assessment of the pericope's literary authenticity that it cannot have canonical authority. Others, however, regard the PA as canonical even if it is not an authentic part of the Gospel of John. These different approaches result from the different canon criteria that are applied in order to determine the canon's boundaries.

Three classical canon models can be distinguished. While Roman Catholic theologians regard the first model as the only valid model, most Protestant theologians prefer model two or three.

2. See R. Morgenthaler, *Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes* (3rd ed.; Zürich: Gotthelf, 1982) 60–62; and since then primarily A. F. Johnson, "A Stylistic Trait of the Fourth Gospel in the Pericope Adulterae?" *JETS* 9 (1966) 91–96; J. P. Heil, "The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress (John 7,53–8,11) Reconsidered," *Bib* 72 (1991) 182–89; E. Ruckstuhl and P. Dschulnigg, *Stilkritik und Verfasserfrage im Johannesevangelium: Die johanneischen Sprachmerkmale auf dem Hintergrund des Neuen Testaments und des zeitgenössischen hellenistischen Schrifttums* (NTOA 17; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1991) 185–86, 223, 231, 236.

3. The text-critical evidence is discussed most fully by U. Becker, *Jesus und die Ehebrecherin: Untersuchungen zur Text- und Überlieferungsgeschichte von Joh. 7,53–8,11* (BNZW 28; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963). See more recently B. Fischer, *Die lateinischen Evangelien bis zum 10. Jahrhundert* (4 vols.; Aus der Geschichte der lateinischen Bibel 13, 15, 17–18; Freiburg: Herder, 1991); M. A. Robinson, "Preliminary Observations Regarding the Pericope Adulterae Based upon Fresh Collation of Nearly All Continuous-Text Manuscripts and Over One Hundred Lectionaries," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 13 (2000) 35–59; and W. Willker, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek Gospels*, vol. 4b: *The Pericope de Adultera: Jo 7:53–8:11 (Jesus and the Adulteress)* (11th ed.; Bremen: University of Bremen, 2014. On-line: <http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wiew/TCG/TC-John-PA.pdf>).

4. Cf. A. D. Baum, "The Original Epilogue (Joh 20:30–31), the Secondary Appendix (21:1–23), and the Editorial Epilogues (21:24–25) of John's Gospel: Observations against the Background of Ancient Literary Conventions," in *Earliest Christianity: History, Literature, and Theology* (ed. M. Bird and J. Maston; WUNT 2/320; Tübingen: Mohr Seibek, 2011) 227–70.

5. Cf. A. D. Baum, "Die Perikope von der Ehebrecherin (Joh 7,53–8,11): Ihr Weg ins Johannesevangelium," in *Sprache lieben – Gottes Wort verstehen: Beiträge zu biblischen Exegese* (ed. W. Hilbrands; Reihe Bibelwissenschaftliche Monographien 17; Giessen: Brunnen, 2011) 231–71, and the secondary literature mentioned there.

THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL APPROACH

The Ecclesiological Canon Criterion

The ecclesiological (or Roman Catholic) approach rests on the conviction that the canon decisions of the church or the magisterium are infallible.⁶ Augustine was a prominent early proponent of a similar approach. He thought that the boundaries of the biblical canon should be determined by a majority of the leading churches.⁷ Augustine recognized the majority opinion of Christianity even in cases where he personally differed on the canonical status of a certain book.

In 1525, the scholastic theologian John Eck referred to Augustine (and went beyond him) when he wrote: "Without the authority of the church scripture is not authentic."⁸ Of particular importance for the Roman Catholic understanding of the biblical canon are the relevant statements of the Council of Trent, which, after two months of debate on the 8th of April 1546, with 24 yes votes, 15 no votes, and 16 abstentions, adopted a decree about the recognition of the holy books and church tradition.⁹

Application to the Pericope Adulterae

The words of the decree demonstrate that the Council of Trent discarded the view that text-critically controversial passages such as Mark 16:9–20 and John 7:53–8:11 were apocryphal:

If anyone does not accept as sacred and canonical the aforesaid books in their entirety and with all their parts, as they have been accustomed to be read in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the old Latin Vulgate edition, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema.¹⁰

To this day, Roman Catholic exegetes state their opinions regarding the canonicity of the PA in connection with this statement of the canon decree of Trent and its prehistory. In some cases, the arguments are rather general. Benedikt Schwank, who does not regard the PA as an authentic part of John's Gospel, says: "Nevertheless it forms a part of the canonical

6. I have discussed the ecclesiological approach in more detail in "Wie begründen wir die Grenzen des neutestamentlichen Schriftenkanons?" *Jahrbuch für evangelikale Theologie* 17 (2003) 83–118, namely, on pp. 84–94.

7. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 2.8.12.

8. Quoted from E. Mühlberg, "Scriptura non est authentica sine autoritate ecclesiae (Johannes Eck)," *ZTK* 97 (2000) 183–209, namely, pp. 184–87.

9. Cf., among others, I. Lønning, *Kanon im Kanon: Zum dogmatischen Grundlagenproblem des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus 10; Munich: Kaiser, 1972) 178–87; and the description of the discussion by A. Maichle, *Der Kanon der biblischen Bücher und das Konzil von Trient: Eine quellenmäßige Darstellung* (Freiburger theologische Studien 33; Freiburg: Herder, 1929) 10–76.

10. *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (trans. H. J. Schroeder; Rockford: Tan, 1978) 18; cf. H. Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (trans. R. J. Deferrari; Fitzwilliam: Loreto, 1957) 245.

scriptures of the New Testament since it has been accepted into the official canon by the magisterium of the church."¹¹ In other cases, scholars refer more specifically to the content of the Vulgate and to the above-quoted judgment of the Council of Trent.

As is well known, Jerome admitted the PA to the text of the Vulgate, his Latin translation of the canonical Gospels, and thereby implemented it in the Latin manuscripts of the Bible.¹² For Alfred Wikenhauser, both the PA's inspiration and its canonicity are not to be questioned "since it belongs to the text of the Vulgate."¹³

According to Raymond Brown, for Roman Catholics,

canonicity is a question of traditional ecclesiastical acceptance and usage. Thus, in the Roman Catholic Church the criterion of canonicity is acceptance into the Vulgate, for the Church has used the Vulgate as its Bible for centuries. The story of the adulteress was accepted by Jerome, and so Catholics regard it as canonical. It also found its way into the received text of the Byzantine Church, and ultimately into the King James Bible. And so the majority of the non-Roman Christians also accept the story as Scripture.¹⁴

Marie-Joseph Lagrange accounts for the inspiration and canonicity with reference to the canon decision of Trent. He underscores, however, that the Tridentine decision does not include or anticipate a historical judgment regarding the origin and authorship of the PA.¹⁵ Similarly, Rudolf Schnackenburg was of the opinion that, because it belongs to the Vulgate and because of the ecclesial position formulated at Trent, the PA has to be regarded "as part of the canon, even if this does not imply a decision about its literary origin."¹⁶ In this connection, Schnackenburg pointed out that, as a rule, Roman Catholic commentators neither omit the PA nor shift it to an appendix but rather interpret it between chaps. 7 and 8 of the Fourth Gospel, where most of the manuscripts contain it.

A slightly different approach has been chosen by the Roman Catholic theologian Karl-Heinz Ohlig. He stresses that the PA would have to be regarded as noncanonical only if it were possible to demonstrate that it did not originate in the earliest (apostolic) church.¹⁷ Since, however, Ohlig considers the ecclesiastical canon criterion binding¹⁸ and the extent of the biblical canon sacrosanct,¹⁹ his historical criterion can under no circum-

11. B. Schwank, *Evangelium nach Johannes* (St. Ottilien: EOS, 1996) 253.

12. Fischer, *Die lateinischen Evangelien bis zum 10. Jahrhundert*, 242.

13. A. Wikenhauser, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (3rd ed.; Regensburger Neues Testament 4; Regensburg: Pustet, 1961) 166.

14. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII* (AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966) 336.

15. M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Jean* (8th ed.; Paris: Lecoffre, 1948) 221–22.

16. R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium* (4th ed.; vol. 2; HTKNT 4/2; Freiburg: Herder, 1985) 224.

17. K.-H. Ohlig, *Die theologische Begründung des neutestamentlichen Kanons in der alten Kirche* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1972) 152.

18. *Ibid.*, 134.

19. *Ibid.*, 14.

stances argue against the canonical status of the PA. Under the umbrella of the Roman Catholic understanding of canonicity, the question as to the canonical status of the PA cannot be answered other than positively. In practice, the classification of the PA as canonical is independent of literary historical judgments as to its origin and its historical relationship to the Gospel of John.

Objections to an Ecclesiological Approach

A first concern regarding the Roman Catholic argument in favor of the canonicity of the PA is that it rests primarily if not exclusively on the decisions and practice of the Western Church and of Jerome, whereas the position of the Greek-speaking fathers of the first millennium is discounted. From a historical point of view, this is not easily comprehensible because it must be assumed that the best historical knowledge about the origin of the PA was available to the eastern parts of the church, particularly in Asia Minor where the Fourth Evangelist composed his book and his disciples transmitted their knowledge about its provenance and its original extent.

Second, from a Protestant perspective, it is possible to accept that infallible authority is attributed to the words of Jesus (e.g., Matt 24:35; John 5:24) and to the teaching of his apostles (e.g. Gal 1:11–12); but it is impossible to ascribe a similar power of judgment either to the church as a whole or to a church father such as Jerome and his Bible translation or to a church synod such as the Tridentine council. None of these entities has ever received a promise of Spirit-led infallibility in theological decisions.

THE PNEUMATOLOGICAL APPROACH

The Pneumatological Criterion of Canonicity

The pneumatological canon criterion was mainly developed and popularized by John Calvin and later taken up by Karl Barth, among others.²⁰ In his *Institutes*, Calvin replaced the canon decision of the church (4.9.14) with what he considered a preferable alternative, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. According to Calvin, even rational arguments are of inferior relevance or even completely dispensable. “The testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason” (1.7.4). Scripture is “carrying its own evidence along with it” (1.7.5). Calvin called on his readers (1.8.1):

Read Demosthenes or Cicero, read Plato, Aristotle, or any other of that class: you will, I admit, feel wonderfully allured, pleased, moved, enchanted; but turn from them to the reading of the Sacred Volume, and whether you will or not, it will so affect you, so pierce your heart, so work its way into your very marrow, that, in comparison of the impression so produced, that of orators and philosophers will almost disappear; making it manifest that in the Sacred Volume there is a

20. Cf. Baum, “Grenzen des Schriftenkanons,” 94–102.

truth divine, a something which makes it immeasurably superior to all the gifts and graces attainable by man.²¹

The reader of this statement must keep two related caveats in mind. First, in the first book of his *Institutes*, Calvin notes that he was skipping over a great deal with the intention of coming back to it at some later place (1.7.5). In the remaining books, however, he did not fulfill this promise. It would therefore be premature to take §1.7–8 as a complete statement on the canon and its boundaries.

Second, Calvin ascribes at least a secondary role to rational arguments (1.8.1):

On the other hand, when recognising its exemption from the common rule, we receive it reverently, and according to its dignity, those proofs which were not so strong as to produce and rivet a full conviction in our minds, become most appropriate helps.²²

In this regard, Calvin mentions the miracles and prophecies of Moses and the prophets (1.8.5–8), refers to the reliability of Jewish tradition (1.8.9), and emphasizes the agreement of the different parts of Scripture with one another (1.8.1). Apart from that, in his commentaries Calvin alludes briefly to historical and theological arguments in favour of the canonicity of a few NT books such as James, Jude, and 2 Peter.²³

A similar approach can be found in the reformed creeds. Article 4 of the *Confessio Gallicana* from 1559 says:

We know these books to be canonical, and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church, as by the testimony and inward illumination of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we can not found any articles of faith.²⁴

This short passage conveys the impression that the testimony of the Holy Spirit was seen as the determining and even exclusive canon criterion. Rational arguments are not mentioned at all. In this regard, the statement of the *Confessio Gallicana* is less nuanced than Calvin's approach.

The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit also plays a decisive role in more recent contributions to the canon debate. In an article on the authority of Scripture and in his *Church Dogmatics*,²⁵ Karl Barth regards the bound-

21. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. H. Beveridge; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 1:75.

22. *Ibid.*

23. J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (trans. J. Owen; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855) 276–77 (on James), 363–65 (on 2 Peter), 427 (on Jude); cf. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 69–78, namely, pp. 72–75.

24. Quoted from Ph. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969) 3.361–62.

25. K. Barth, "Das Schriftprinzip der reformierten Kirche," *Zwischen den Zeiten* 3 (1925) 215–45; idem, *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes: Prolegomena zur kirchlichen Dogmatik* (9th ed.; Die kirchliche Dogmatik 1/1–2; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1975) 1/2:526–30.

aries of the biblical canon as open in principle. In his eyes, it is possible to modify the extent of the canon. But those who want to do so must appeal to the Holy Spirit as a witness for its necessity; and there would be an expectation that the Holy Spirit would witness in the same way to the rest of the church.²⁶ Barth regretted that after Calvin many placed the rational arguments over the primary criterion, which is the internal testimony of the Spirit.²⁷

A more recent defense of the pneumatological approach comes from James Sawyer. He argues that the presumed canon criteria of the early church were only applied retrospectively.²⁸ Based on this assumption, he seems to imply that those criteria should not be considered relevant to the modern discussion of canon boundaries either. Biographically, Sawyer says, acceptance of the canon and its boundaries by an individual is effected in three steps. First of all, a person is confronted with human testimonies to the sacredness of the Scriptures. Second, he experiences the affect Scripture has on his soul when he reads it. And third, the Holy Spirit assures him of the extent of the canon and leads him to agree with the canon consensus of the church.²⁹

A very thorough presentation of the pneumatological approach to the NT canon has quite recently been published by Michael Kruger. He integrates the strengths of other approach but regards the testimony of the Spirit as the most decisive factor.³⁰

Application to the Pericope Adulterae

In the light of this pneumatological canon criterion, one should expect that also in his remarks on the canonicity of the PA Calvin would ascribe a secondary role to rational arguments in favor of a determination as to whether this section engages its hearers or readers with the same effects as the undisputed parts of the Bible. This, however, is not the case. In support of his decision to interpret the PA as a part of the NT canon, Calvin did not invoke the internal testimony of the Spirit but rather applied observations with regard to content as well as (text-)historical arguments.³¹

26. *Ibid.*, 1/2:671–72.

27. *Ibid.*, 1/2:595–97; cf. E. Achtemeier, “The Canon as the Voice of the Living God,” in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (ed. by C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 119–30, who follows Calvin and Barth. She laments the degradation of the canon in church discussions: “the frustration that one experiences in trying to carry on that debate apart from any common recognition of a canon for the church is sometimes almost overwhelming” (p. 120).

28. M. J. Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon of the New Testament,” *GTTJ* 11 (1991) 29–52, namely, pp. 37–38.

29. *Ibid.*, 50; cf. S. J. P. K. Riekert, “Critical Research and the One Christian Canon Comprising Two Testaments,” *Neot* 14 (1981) 21–41, namely, pp. 22–26.

30. M. J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). This magisterial work deserves a much more detailed treatment than I can offer in this article.

31. J. Calvin, *The Gospel according to St. John 1–10* (trans. T. H. L. Parker; Calvin’s Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 206–9.

Also Michael Kruger, in his monograph on the self-authenticating quality of the canon, does not deal at any length with the relationship between canon criticism and textual criticism. But with a view to Mark 16:9–20, he doubts that the testimony of the Spirit solves textual variants: “there is no reason to think that the final shape of the text is necessarily connected to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.”³²

A strictly pneumatological analysis of the PA appears actually to be a rare exception. At least Garry Burge has pondered the application of this criterion to the PA, albeit only in an interrogative form and as one possibility among others:

The story edifies the Church and has often become a vehicle through which the Holy Spirit works. Are these the grounds of the Protestant canon? If so, the passage should remain firmly anchored in the NT.³³

However, Burge continues, if the criteria of textual criticism are applied, the PA “should slip into the margin as an edifying agraphon of Jesus.”

Objections to a Pneumatological Approach

Some proponents of a pneumatological approach argue that, during the development of the canon in the period of the early church, historical and content-related criteria were not applied or, if so, only retrospectively. However, the work done by Karl-Heinz Ohlig, who has assembled all the canon criteria mentioned in early Christian literature, proves this historical judgment to be unfounded. Ohlig mentions a book’s apostolicity, its historicity, its orthodoxy, its catholicity, and so on.³⁴ In addition, one of the early Christian canon criteria was a book’s orthonymity or literary authenticity.³⁵ In contrast to these salient canon criteria, the church fathers hardly ever sought to establish the canonicity of a book with reference to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. This criterion is not part of Ohlig’s otherwise comprehensive list.³⁶

It is beyond doubt that the NT knows of an internal testimony of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Acts 2:37; 16:14; Rom 8:16). However, the NT ascribes a rather limited radius of operation to this spiritual testimony. On the one hand, the *testimonium spiritus sancti internum* is clearly said to assure the believers of the fact that they are God’s children. On the other hand, the

32. Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 101.

33. G. M. Burge, “A Specific Problem in the NT Text and Canon: The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11),” *JETS* 27 (1984) 141–48, namely, p. 148; cf. idem, *John* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 244–45.

34. Ohlig, *Die theologische Begründung*, 54–309; cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988) 255–69.

35. A. D. Baum, “Literarische Echtheit als Kanonkriterium in der alten Kirche,” *ZNW* 88 (1997) 97–110; idem, *Pseudepigraphie und literarische Fälschung im frühen Christentum* (WUNT 2/138; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 99–148.

36. According to W. Neuser, “Calvin und der Calvinismus,” in *Die Lehrentwicklung im Rahmen der Konfessionalität* (ed. C. Andresen; Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980) 243–45, the testimony of the Holy Spirit is a canon criterion that the Reformers developed.

Bible does not indicate that God's Spirit delivers specific knowledge about the extent of the biblical canon irrespective of the available historical evidence and apart from rational theological arguments. Rather, Scripture itself ascribes an important role to human reason. Jesus prompted one of the scribes: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind" (Luke 10:27). There is no reason to suspend this basic principle during the process of identification of God's revelation. Inspired and un-inspired statements can hardly be distinguished apart from analytical observations and rational argumentation.

It would be interesting to see if Christians who are not familiar with the PA and who had no access to any evidence about the historical origin and the theological quality of this section but relied instead solely on the testimony of the Holy Spirit could come to a conclusion as to its canonical status—and if their conclusions would agree.

THE HISTORICAL-THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

The Historical-Theological Canon Criteria

The historical-theological approach is more complex than the other two approaches mentioned so far. One of its most prominent adherents was Martin Luther, who applied it in his translation of the NT into contemporary German, which was published in 1522 (*Septembertestament*).³⁷ Like Calvin, Luther reckoned with the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit but did not apply it as a canon criterion. He also did not fall back on an infallible judgment of the church or its magisterium. When he shifted the letters of James and Jude, the letter to the Hebrews, and the Apocalypse to the end of the NT and deprived these books of numeration, he did so on the basis of two historical and two content-related arguments. Historically, Luther regarded a book's (apostolic) authorship and its reception in the early church as relevant. In terms of content, Luther asked whether a book is orthodox and "whether it emphasizes the prominence of Christ or not."³⁸

With modifications, these criteria have more recently also been applied by theologians such as the Dutchman Herman Ridderbos, the American Laird Harris, and the Briton John Wenham.³⁹ They seek to follow the canon criteria that were already decisive when the NT canon was shaped during the first centuries of church history.⁴⁰

When Luther's historical and theological criteria (which he had inherited from the early church) are applied to a text-critically controversial

37. Cf. "Grenzen des Schriftenkanons," 105–17.

38. Martin Luther: *Selections from His Writings* (ed. J. Dillenberger; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961) 35–56 (on the letters of James and Jude).

39. H. Ridderbos, *Begründung des Glaubens: Heilsgeschichte und Heilige Schrift* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1963) 44; R. L. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible: An Historical and Exegetical Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957) 284–94; J. W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Guildford: Eagle, 1993) 191–95.

40. Cf. the overview in Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 255–69.

passage such as the PA, both its orthodoxy and its historicity have to be reconsidered.

The Orthodoxy of the Pericope Adulterae

Already the (Novatianist) proponents of a rigorous punishment for adulterers in the early church with whom Pacian disputed appear to have considered the PA unorthodox.⁴¹ In contemporary Christianity, however, it is nearly impossible to find theologians who regard the PA as morally precarious.

A prominent representative of the majority view that the PA is theological completely harmless was Calvin, who wrote in his commentary on the Gospel of John that it “contains nothing unworthy of an Apostolic Spirit.”⁴² This estimation can be tested without too much exegetical effort by comparing the three main theological statements of the pericope with the rest of the NT.

The words Jesus addresses to the adulteress at the very end of the narrative are ethically unobjectionable: “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (John 8:11b). A small collection of related passages can show this. John 8:11b has close parallels in John 5:14 (“Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you”) and in 1 John 2:1. The Sermon on the Mount contains other admonitions to abstain from sin (Matt 5:29, and more). Likewise, Paul exhorts the addressees of his letters not to sin (Rom 6:15; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 4:26) and warns them not to misuse their Christian freedom as an opportunity for sin (Gal 5:13).

The warning directed to the opponents, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7), is also in accordance with requirements in other parts of the NT with regard to those who want to make judgments about their neighbors. A saying of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is very similar: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matt 7:1–2). In agreement with this basic principle, in the PA Jesus reminds his adversaries of their own sinfulness for which they also deserve the death penalty. Paul wrote about the same relation between the sin of the accused and the sin of their accusers in Rom 2:1–3:

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, “We know that God’s judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.” Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?

41. Pacian, *Epistula ad Sympronianum* 3.20; cf. *Didascalia Apostolorum* 7.31; *Constitutiones Apostolorum* 2.24.6.

42. Calvin, *The Gospel according to St. John* 1–10, 206.

The apostle repeated the same idea more concisely in Rom 14:10: "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." Measured against the rest of the NT, the statement ascribed to Jesus in John 8:7 has to be considered fully orthodox.

The statement with the greatest potential to provoke disagreement is: "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11a). According to this assertion, Jesus did not plead for the stoning of the adulteress, which the Law of Moses stipulated, but awarded her forgiveness. The rest of the Fourth Gospel contains many parallels to this merciful attitude. In John 3:17, Jesus says that God did not send his son into the world "to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." According to John 5:24, those who hear the words of Jesus and believe God who sent him will not come under judgment. Likewise, in John 8:15, Jesus says about himself: "I judge no one." Also in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus acts according to this gracious principle. He deals mercifully with publicans and sinners (Matt 9:9–13). He wants to save the sinful publican Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10). About sinners, he says that their repentance causes joy in heaven (Luke 15:10). He grants forgiveness to the sinful woman who anoints his feet (Luke 7:36–50). The letters of Paul follow the same line (cf. Rom 8:1; 1 Tim 1:15).

The Historicity of the Pericope Adulterae

The church fathers and the reformers were convinced that a canonical text not only had to be orthodox but also had to meet certain historical criteria. Every canonical book was analyzed concerning its origin in apostolic times. When a text made a historical claim, theologians wanted to know whether this claim was true. In the case of the PA, the questions as to its historical origin have been more controversial than the questions concerning its orthodoxy.

The number of those scholars who have doubted the historicity of the event related in the PA is relatively small. But at times, this concern has been raised. Theodor Beza, Calvin's colleague and successor in Geneva, is a prominent example. About the middle of the 16th century, he wrote in his book *Jesu Christi domini nostri novum testamentum*:

I don't know how probable it is when the pericope goes on to tell that Jesus and the woman were left alone in the Temple; it does not quite fit with what is said a bit later, that is in verse 12, namely that he (i.e. Jesus) addressed the scribes anew; and that he (i.e. the evangelist) said, Jesus wrote with his finger on the ground, is something new and appears unfamiliar, I am not able to determine how this can be explained adequately enough. Further, the pericope exhibits such a large variety of readings that I am inclined to doubt the credibility of this whole narrative.⁴³

43. The Latin text which I have translated has been quoted by Becker, *Jesus und die Ehebrecherin*, 1.

More recently, Hans von Campenhausen expressed the conviction that the PA does not relate a historical event from the life of Jesus. He thought that it was developed in the first half of the second century in order to dispute the position that deadly sins such as adultery or murder were unforgivable. According to von Campenhausen, when interpreted with caution, the PA is "theologically unobjectionable." But it is "replete with implausibilities. It can hardly be placed in the life of Jesus."⁴⁴ Dieter Lührmann explicitly endorses von Campenhausen's judgment.⁴⁵ Hartwig Thyen also disputes the historicity of the pericope with reference to von Campenhausen.⁴⁶ David Parker comes to the same conclusion.⁴⁷

In contrast, the majority of commentators and textual critics think that, although the PA was not an original part of the Fourth Gospel, nevertheless its content is probably historical. Two representatives of this position may suffice. According to Bruce Metzger, the PA has "all the earmarks of historical veracity."⁴⁸ Ulrich Becker mentions three arguments in favor of the historical authenticity of the PA: (1) The topic of the debate between Jesus and his adversaries was well known in first century Judaism. (2) Jesus' judgment differs from the view of the Torah and its defenders. (3) Jesus forgives in his own authority.⁴⁹

It can be added that the narrative about the adulteress (John 8:2–11) probably already formed part of the work of Papias in the first half of the second century.⁵⁰ Papias may have taken it over in Asia Minor from the disciples of the apostles who transmitted the story as a tradition that came from their teachers.⁵¹ In this case, the narrative originated in the first century A.D. The slight traces of a Johannine style in the PA convey the impression that it came from a group consisting of the Evangelist and his disciples.⁵² It is not impossible that it formed part of the oral Jesus traditions that, according to John 20:30 and 21:25, were not included in the Fourth Gospel. But this, of course, cannot be historically substantiated.

44. H. Freiherr von Campenhausen, "Zur Perikope von der Ehebrecherin (Joh 7,53–8,11)," *ZNW* 68 (1977) 164–75, namely, p. 175.

45. D. Lührmann, "Die Geschichte von einer Sünderin und andere apokryphe Jesusüberlieferungen bei Didymos von Alexandrien," *NovT* 32 (1990) 289–316, namely, p. 301–4.

46. H. Thyen, "Jesus und die Ehebrecherin (Joh 7,53–8,11)," in *Religionsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (ed. A. von Dobbeler; Tübingen: Francke, 2000) 433–46, namely, pp. 441–46.

47. D. C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 95–102.

48. B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994) 188; cf. B. M. Metzger and B. D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament* (4th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 320.

49. Becker, *Jesus und die Ehebrecherin*, 165–74, namely, p. 174.

50. Papias in Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.39.17: "The same writer (i.e. Papias) . . . has expounded another story about a woman, who was accused before the Lord of many sins, which the Gospel according to the Hebrews contains" (LCL, Lake).

51. Papias in Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.39.3–4; cf. A. D. Baum, "Papias als Kommentator evangelischer Aussprüche Jesu: Erwägungen zur Art seines Werkes," *NovT* 38 (1996) 257–76, namely, pp. 258–69.

52. Cf. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 335.

The Canon-Critical Judgment

A canon-critical judgment that takes historical and theological aspects into account can arrive at different conclusions. If the PA is considered to be orthodox and historical nothing speaks against crediting it with canonical authority. On the other hand, those who question the pericope's orthodoxy and/or historicity will not be inclined to invest it with a canonical status.

Not many, however, explicitly contest the PA's canonicity because they think it is unhistorical or unorthodox. Presumably, Beza did, but this cannot be deduced with full certainty from his above-quoted statement.

The judgment rendered by Andreas Köstenberger is a special case because he regards the PA neither as unorthodox nor as unhistorical. Still, he is not able to accept it as inspired or canonical and emphatically warns his readers about including the pericope in a Bible translation and about preaching on it, as well as against interpreting it in a commentary on the Fourth Gospel. Rather, according to Köstenberger, commentators should take Origen as their model, who from John 7:52 immediately passed on to John 8:12. Köstenberger accounts for this advice with the following remark:

The account almost certainly was not part of the original Gospel and therefore should not be regarded as part of the Christian canon. Nor does inspiration extend to it. In principle, the pericope is no different from other possibly authentic sayings of Jesus that may be found in NT apocryphal literature. Thus, though it may be possible to derive a certain degree of edification from the study of this pericope, proper conservatism and caution suggest that the passage be omitted from preaching in the churches (not to mention inclusion in the main body of translations, even within square brackets . . .).⁵³

With this reasoning, Köstenberger seems to deny that (probably) authentic extracanonical sayings of Jesus are authoritative and have canonical status. But what can be more authoritative than the authentic words and deeds of Jesus? Did not the first Christians develop the whole concept of canonicity on the basis of Jesus' (and his apostles') authority? Did not they regard every authentic word and deed of Jesus as normative for their Christian faith? I do not believe that, with his answer to the canon-critical question regarding the PA, Köstenberger has done full justice to these closely related issues.

John Calvin did not say explicitly whether he regarded the PA as part of John's Gospel. But after a short comment on the text-critical evidence in the manuscripts and on the pericope's apostolic spirit, he concluded that "there is no reason why we should refuse to make us of it."⁵⁴ Subsequently, Calvin interpreted the PA just as he did every other pericope of the Fourth Gospel and derived from it some theological principles. He appears, therefore, to have implicitly acknowledged the PA as a canonical text that had the same authority as other sections from the four canonical Gospels.

53. A. J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 248–49.

54. Calvin, *The Gospel according to St. John* 1–10, 206.

Theodor Zahn remarked that “the pericope contains nothing which can make it ethically objectionable or historically implausible.”⁵⁵ Because Zahn insisted on Luther’s canon-critical approach to identify the extent of the canon on the basis of theological and historical criteria,⁵⁶ his judgment suggests that he regarded the PA as canonical.

In his book on the biblical canon, F. F. Bruce dealt first with the inauthentic longer ending of Mark. He argued that the statement about picking up snakes and drinking deadly poison (Mark 16:18) reveals the ending’s secondary character. Bruce’s canon-critical conclusion was: “The right of these twelve verses to receive canonical recognition is doubtful.” In his remarks on the PA, however, Bruce did not mention any content-related problems, nor did he regard the narrated event as unhistorical. Therefore, regarding this passage he wrote: “As genuine reminiscence of Jesus’ ministry,” John 7:53–8:11 “is eminently worthy of being treated as canonical.”⁵⁷

Bruce Metzger assessed the longer ending of Mark in a different way. Although it was not part of the Second Gospel, Justin and Tatian already knew of it. Therefore, Metzger wrote, “the passage ought to be accepted as part of the canonical text of Mark.” This, however, does not apply to the intermediate ending of Mark with its grandiloquent language because this passage probably had “an apocryphal origin, subsequent to the apostolic age.”⁵⁸ Against this background, Metzger’s remark in his *Textual Commentary* that the PA has all the hallmarks of historicity demonstrates that he was inclined to invest it with a canonical status. The fact that concerning the longer ending of Mark Metzger did not come to the same conclusion as Bruce might reveal a slight difference between their approaches: whereas Metzger applied a mainly historical standard, Bruce gave equal weight to historical and content-related criteria.

In a commentary that addresses a wide readership, Gerhard Maier notes that the PA is missing in many manuscripts and was a secondary addition to the Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless, he is convinced that it contains “ancient Jesus tradition.” “I assume that the narrative is reliable. Possibly, it comes from the Johannine School in Asia Minor whose most prominent members were Papias and Aristion.”⁵⁹ Following this explanation, Maier interprets the PA in the same way as any other pericope of the Gospel and develops some ideas as to its exposition and application in a Bible study group. Clearly, he treats it as a legitimate basis for Christian teaching and preaching.⁶⁰

55. T. Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1983) 724.

56. Cf. idem, *Die bleibende Bedeutung des neutestamentlichen Kanons für die Kirche* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1898).

57. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 288–89.

58. B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 269–71.

59. G. Maier, *Johannes-Evangelium* (2 vols.; Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Haenssler, 2007) 1:355. On the Johannine school in Asia Minor, see his *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche* (WUNT 25; Tübingen: Mohr Sebeck, 1981).

60. Idem, *Johannes-Evangelium*, 1:363–64.

Objections to the Historical-Theological Approach

One of the main objections against the historical-theological approach and against a historical and a theological testing of the PA's canonicity is that it presupposes an open canon and therefore deprives the church of the normative basis for its theological judgments.⁶¹

In response, we should not forget that in the first four to six Christian centuries, the local churches of different places and areas regarded different collections of Scriptures as canonical. In Alexandria, Hebrews was regarded as inspired and normative very early on, while in the West it was not accepted as canonical before the fourth century. On the other hand, fathers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen counted the *Epistle of Barnabas* among the Holy Scriptures. Likewise, in some areas of the church the Shepherd of Hermas received canonical recognition during the third and fourth centuries. This uncertain fringe of the Bible notwithstanding, the church of the early centuries was able, on the basis of this nonuniform scriptural basis, to develop sound answers to far-reaching questions about the Trinity and Christology.

In the light of this experience, modern Christians should be in a position to do theology on a sufficiently solid scriptural basis, even if the canonicity of the PA cannot be settled by an infallible judgment of the Church or by an internal testimony of the Holy Spirit—and all the more if, as we have seen, the PA does not contain anything that goes against or beyond other tenets of the NT. The NT is so redundant that a church without the PA would not be much worse off than a church that has the PA in its biblical canon.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. Whether the PA originated in the Johannine school in Asia Minor or not, the *historicity* of the event it relates has not been disproved. It is by all means plausible that the incident that the PA narrates is just as authentic as the words and deeds of Jesus that are in the original Gospel of John.

2. Measured against the Johannine discourses, the words of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, and the content of the NT letters, the *orthodoxy* of the PA also cannot be denied. All the statements of Jesus made in the PA have close parallels in the remaining NT.

3. If the canonicity of the PA is determined according to the same historical and content-related criteria that the ancient church applied during the development of the canon of Scriptures, nothing speaks against the canonicity of the PA. If the behavior described in the PA can with sufficient probability be traced back to Jesus himself, there is no reason for denying this pericope a normative role for our Christian thinking and acting. In this

61. Thus A. Ziegenaus, "Die Kanonbildung als Grundlage theologischer Schriftinterpretation," in *Veritatis Catholicae* (ed. A. Ziegenaus et al.; Aschaffenburg: Pattloch, 1985) 203–25, namely, p. 211.

case, the story of Jesus and the adulteress comes also into consideration for preaching and as a proof text in theological discussions. This assessment does not rest on an infallible and therefore binding decision of the church or its magisterium. But a Lutheran approach can lead to the same result, albeit by means of different criteria.

4. When the PA is accepted as canonical and into the NT, it should carry a footnote that mentions the text-critical and canon-critical peculiarities of this pericope. It should not be placed between chaps. 7 and 8 of the Gospel of John because it is not part of the original text of this book. Rather, it should be put after John's Gospel, because it probably comes from the same historical root. Also, to those who do not see a close connection between the PA's and the Fourth Gospel's origins, the end of the Gospel of John might appear to be the most adequate place. It is also the end of the four-Gospel canon, and the PA belongs not to the "Apostolos" but to the "Euangelion."

5. Those who hesitate to accept the PA as canonical can remove it from the NT without having to fear a serious loss. Everything the PA has to say is also expressed several times in other parts of the biblical canon. The additional benefit of the PA is not some singular ethical or theological statement. Its particular value lies in the fact that the PA presents the forgiveness offered by Jesus to those who are condemned to death by the Mosaic law in a more elaborate, more colorful, and more pointed way than any other passage of the NT.