

Jennifer Knust and Tommy Wasserman, *To Cast the First Stone: The Transmission of a Gospel Story*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. ISBN 9780691169880. Hardcover, pp. xix + 440. \$47.00/£35.00.

- [1] The *pericope adulterae* (John 7:53–8:11) has occupied and puzzled modern research in various ways. In Johannine scholarship it stands on the sidelines, because according to the unanimous judgment of historical-critical research it does not belong to the original text of the Gospel of John and thus cannot contribute insight into the theology of the Fourth Gospel. Commentaries usually pass over this passage quickly, if they see the need to deal with this “spurious” passage at all. With regard to text criticism, the findings are relatively clear at first glance, but extremely complicated and confusing in detail, so that nonspecialists are not be able to grasp the mass of remote details.
- [2] In a magisterial and still well-readable manner, the present monograph not only offers everything that can be gleaned from even the most remote sources on the history and reception of this passage. It also opens up fascinating new perspectives on this particular text and also on the entire field of scribal culture, interpretation history, and artistic and liturgical reception. It thus demonstrates the fascination that this passage, which today is often treated rather stepmotherly, has exerted in most periods of its premodern history. The book is the happy result of many years of collaboration between a specialist textual critic (Wasserman) and an exegete (Knust) who has long had a particular penchant for the reception history and impact of biblical texts.
- [3] This work is the third special monograph on the adulteress pericope. The first modern monograph-size treatment by Ulrich Becker (*Jesus und die Ehebrecherin: Untersuchungen zur Text- und Überlieferungsgeschichte von Joh 7,53–8,11*, BZNW 26 [Berlin: Töpelmann, 1963]) emphasized the age and the possible material authenticity of the short narrative in spite of its uncontested text-critical secondary character, thus rehabilitating it as a valuable Jesus story in spite of the uncertainty of its source. The monograph by Chris Keith (*The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus*, NTTSD 38 [Leiden: Brill, 2009]), written already in a changed scholarly climate, focused attention on the possible function of the insertion into the Johannine text and put forward the idea that the aim was to prove the writing ability and thus the “education” of Jesus in the face of relevant attacks on Christianity in a later period.
- [4] The present monograph not only presents the most complete information about the textual witnesses and receptions and a thorough argument about the possibilities of insertion or deletion. It also leads beyond the simple questions of Johannine or Jesus-related authenticity and ecclesial canonicity and sheds light on the various milieus of scribes and interpreters, their habits and interests, the ethical debates and liturgical needs in various church contexts, and the stunning fascination this single pericope stimulated in spite of its well-known absence in numerous manuscripts and sources. The book, thus, reflects the hermeneutical change from issues of historical origin and church authority to the consideration of the cultural impact of this precious piece of the memory of Jesus. Yet it has to be emphasized, the authors reflect this change not due to a fashionable tendency of neglecting or skipping historical questions but in full consideration of all the details of material evidence and historical contextualization. In the end, they present a clearly evidenced historical argument for the view “that the story was interpolated into a Greek copy of John in the West, probably during the first half of the third century, and with great care; that the Johannine pericope was then gradually but decisively brought into texts, liturgy, and art in Greek and Latin, albeit at different rates; and thus that the story

- was not actively suppressed on theological grounds ... despite the custom among some Byzantine scribes and scholars of identifying the passage as spurious" (343–54).
- [5] After an introduction, which already presents the essential facts of the textual attestation and nonattestation of the passage, the argumentation of the book is divided into eight chapters, which in turn are divided into four parts. These illuminate (1) the significance of the pericope in modern text-critical discussion, (2) the question of whether a subsequent insertion or a deletion of the passage is more likely, (3) the different history of the pericope in the Latin and Byzantine church traditions, and (4) its liturgical and artistic reception.
- [6] The first chapter sketches the significance of this passage (along with the longer conclusion of the Gospel of Mark) for the formation of modern textual criticism and historical criticism of the gospels in general. It offers a brief look at the older and still existing defenders of the *textus receptus* and at the different treatment of the pericope in commentaries on the Gospel of John. Already here it becomes clear that the question of the "authenticity" or the "true meaning" of the text can no longer be central. "This book regards the puzzle of the pericope's uneven transmission and reception as an invitation to reconsider wider attitudes about 'the gospel,' Gospel books, and 'sinning' women among the many early Christian writers, editors, scribes, and scholars who left marks both on the Gospels and on this story" (46).
- [7] The second chapter examines the forms of citation of and allusion to Jesus material or gospel texts in the second and third centuries, thus reconstructing the scribal milieu in which reference to this pericope as an authoritative tradition, as a gospel, and ultimately the insertion of this narrative into the Johannine text was possible. The authors offer a valuable overview of the transmission of the Gospel of John in the second and third centuries, of the material details of the important manuscripts (e.g., P66 and P75). The consequence is cautiously phrased: "In a world where books were shared hand to hand and group to group, the full control of Gospel texts would have been difficult to achieve. Scribal convention did demand close attention to earlier exemplars. Scholars did expect their texts to be produced with care. Nevertheless, Christian esteem both for the *pericope adulterae* and for the Gospel of John somehow bestowed two rival copies of this Gospel to later generations, one with the story and one without it" (95). As an esteemed Jesus tradition, "the pericope adulterae was always 'gospel,' whether or not it was present in the first copies of John" (95).
- [8] The third and fourth chapters offer a detailed discussion of the argument, documented since Augustine and repeatedly advanced by critics in modern times, that the passage might have been erased from the gospel by moralists or clerics because it might encourage women to be immoral or counteract the penitential discipline of the church. To this end, Marcion's editorial activities are first discussed, and then the practice of omitting transcribers is described in detail. In doing so, the authors referred to an insight—hitherto unknown to most exegetes—that omissions are ultimately more frequent than additions, so that the text-critical rule *lectio brevior potior* is by no means mechanically applicable. Nevertheless, "deletion of the pericope adulterae from copies of John would have been a bold if not impossible step. Scribes were extremely unlikely to omit such a large portion of text, [and] scholars were trained to mark texts rather than delete them" (134). Furthermore, in case of objection to such a narrative, interpreters would have had the possibility of a more precise explanation. But the evidence of ancient (Christian and non-Christian) literature shows, instead, that stories about immoral women were extremely popular, and tales about repenting prostitutes could serve as positive exemplars, in the gospel and else-

where, in arguments about the distinctive chastity of Jesus followers. Thus, the reference to the story in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, recommending a policy of mercy against sinners, cannot be attributed to a tolerant approach to adultery or female sins. Thus, the lack of reference to the story in most copies of John and in many early church writers cannot be explained from deletion but only from the fact that they “did not know the story or, alternatively, that they did not find it interesting enough to cite in their extant writings” (171). “Still, the pericope was always ‘gospel’ to some community of Christians somewhere, and, as far as we can tell, there was no reason either to delete or to suppress it” (171).

- [9] Chapter 5 provides a thorough investigation of the history of the story in the Greek and Byzantine tradition. Eusebius still seems not to know the story from the Gospel of John, thus he links a similar story he received from Papias with the Gospel according to the Hebrews. The testimony of Didymus still seems to confirm that this Alexandrian scholar did not know the story from John, although he could cite it, nevertheless, as a genuine Jesus tradition. In a very detailed investigation, the authors now collect traces of the story in Egyptian testimonies and ivory plates, demonstrating that in late antique Egypt, “the adulteress’s story was certainly known” (207), but not necessarily associated with John.
- [10] Chapter 6, then, traces the testimonies from the Latin West, starting with Ambrose of Milan and Hilary of Poitiers, then including traces in the Old Latin translation, and, finally, discussing the testimony of Jerome’s writings who claims to have found the story “in many both the Greek as well as the Latin copies” of John (*Adv. Pelag.* 2.17.16–18). On this background the testimony of the bilingual Codex Bezae is discussed which provides the earliest extant manuscript witness to the story in the Gospel of John.
- [11] The evidence shows the difference between the East and the West. Whereas in Greek lectionaries, even from later centuries, the pericope was omitted from the Pentecost lection John 7:37–8:12, and at a later stage a chapter and title was added to the Old Greek *kephalaia* and *titloi*, confirming the growth of interest in the passage, “in Latin, the centrality of the story was never questioned” (248). It was “present in the West within a Greek copy of John prior to Jerome’s revised translation, “discussed as Johannine by the principal Latin fathers (including, importantly, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine), and incorporated as a lection in the movable feasts of the Roman church” (248). From the differing evidence in the East and the West, the conclusion of the authors is convincing that “the passage was introduced into a Greek copy of John in the Greek-speaking West, then gradually moved East in time to be retained as fully traditional in both contexts” (248).
- [12] The survey could be complete here, but the authors continue in two more chapters discussing the afterlife of the *pericope adulterae* in late antiquity and early medieval liturgy. The argument demonstrates that the impression conveyed by textual critics that the passage was “overlooked, marginalized, or disregarded” (252) is incorrect. Eustathios of Thessaloniki could even call it a “pearl of the Gospel” (*Homily* 6.435–439). In a very detailed survey of the development of the system of *capitula* and *kephalaia*, the authors follow the practice of the liturgical use in the Pentecost lection where the pericope was still skipped, on the other hand, but where the evidence confirms its growing significance in later manuscripts. Thus, the pericope “did not enter Byzantine copies of John until the close of the fourth century, or even later” (299), and due to the custom of skipping it in the lections, the pericope was also “sometimes displaced in later minuscule manuscripts” (299).
- [14] The final step of the argument moves to the testimony of liturgy hymnology and visual arts which ultimately confirm its impact. “By the medieval period, the passage was certainly

known in both contexts: present in most medieval Gospel and lectionary manuscripts, read aloud on specific occasions, and assigned to various rites and feasts” (339).

- [15] The hermeneutical consequence of the extensive survey merits to be considered. “Whether or not Jesus ever met and forgave an adulteress, Christians from at least the third century onward believed that he did” (343). It is an odd consequence of the Humanists’ call to go “back to the sources,” the findings of modern text criticism, and the Reformers’ anti-Papal principle that any theological truth should only be taken from truly canonical ‘Scriptures’ that the authority, validity, and authenticity of this precious story was questioned in Protestant circles and that in particular so-called fundamentalists even feel obliged to suppress and mute the testimony of this precious memory of Jesus. Thus, the complicated history of this pericope urges scholars and preachers to rethink problematic ideas of canonicity or authenticity. For a commentator on John who cannot ignore the impact of the biblical texts in their later reception, it is mandatory to include the testimony of this story—not without the necessary historical explanations—as it is part of the text that inspired worshippers and readers through many centuries, although it is certainly not part of the text the author or redactor(s) of the gospel once left to be copied and distributed. The shape of the memory of Jesus, the extent of a canonical text, the character of canonicity, and even the ideas about its inspiration must be reconsidered and rephrased in consideration of these complicated historical processes and cannot be limited to an ideal, but ultimately inaccessible origin, inspired author, or initial text. With the argument of the present book, textual criticism happily leaves the ivory tower of specialists, and text critical and historical insights strongly touch on hermeneutical and theological convictions.
- [16] The well-produced book is nicely illustrated with a large number of photographs of manuscripts and artworks. Numerous tables compile information about the representation of the passage in critical editions, second- and third-century copies of John, references to the story of the adulteress in various centuries, and art-historical evidence, and well-compiled indices facilitate access to ancient passages, manuscripts, and subjects.
- [17] The authors’ final conclusion deserves to be quoted at the end of this review: “There is so much more to the story of the woman taken in adultery than what the story has meant, there is so much more to the *pericope adulterae* than answering the question of whether or not it was written by John the Evangelist, and there is so much more to the Gospels than can be captured in a single book” (344). There is little, however, that could be written about this pericope that is not presented nicely and convincingly in this magisterial monograph.

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