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## 1 Introduction

The *Pericope Adulterae* is usually seen as an interesting excursus in Textual Criticism, a test-case of different source theories, or a battlefield for those who want to include it to or exclude it from the Bible. However, concerning the study of the historical Jesus, the passage gives important and usually underestimated information – not only for reconstructing Jesus' relationship towards women and sinners, but also for illuminating the events that eventually proved fatal for him.

It is generally accepted that the *Pericope Adulterae* is not originally a part of the Gospel of John, but that it was later incorporated into the Fourth Gospel.<sup>1</sup> The

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- 1 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Word Biblical Commentary 36; 2nd edn, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 100; J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St John: Volume 2* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 715; C. L. Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), p. 140; C. B. Bridges "The Canonical Status of the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53-8:11)", *Stone-Campbell Journal* 11 (2008), pp. 213–221 (213); R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes: Volume 1* (2 vols.; The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 335; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 413; G. M. Burge, "A Specific Problem in the New Testament Text and Canon. The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 7.53-8.11)", *JETS* 27 (1984), pp. 141–148 (144); P. Comfort, "The Pericope of the Adulteress", *Bible Translator* 40 (1989), pp. 145–147; B. D. Ehrman, "Jesus and the Adulteress", *NTS* 34 (1988), pp. 24–44; E. Haenchen, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7–21* (trans. Robert W. Funk; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 22; E. F. Harrison, "The Son of God Among the Sons of Men VIII. Jesus and the Woman Taken in Adultery", *BSac* 103 (1946), pp. 431–439 (431); K. H. Hughes, "The Lukan Special Material and Tradition History of the *Pericope Adulterae*", *NovT* 55 (2013), pp. 232–251; C. Keith, "Jesus Began to Write: Literacy, the Pericope Adulterae, and the Gospel of John" (Doctoral dissertation; University of Edinburgh, 2009), p. 223; A. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 245; E. McMillan, "Textual Authority for John 7:53-8:11", *ResQ* 3 (1959), pp. 18–22 (22); J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 461; L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. edn, 1995); J. D. Punch, "The Pericope Adulterae: Theories of Insertion & Omission" (Doctoral dissertation; Radboud University Nijmegen, 2010), pp. 11–12; F. Salvoni, "Textual Authority for John 6:53-8:11", *ResQ* 4 (1960), pp. 11–15 (11); F. A. Schilling, "The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress", *ATR* 37 (1955), pp. 91–106 (116); R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1995), p. 110.

The passage is, nevertheless, seen as Johannine by K. E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2008), p. 240. C. P. Baylis, "The Woman Caught in Adultery: A Test of Jesus as the Greater Prophet", *BSac* 146 (1989), pp. 171–184 (172); J. P. Heil, "The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress (John 7,53–8,11) Reconsidered", *Biblica* 72 (1991), pp. 182–191; Z. C. Hodges, "Problem Passages in the Gospel of John Part 8. The Woman Taken in Adultery (John

author or source of the pericope is not known. However, the *Pericope Adulterae* was revered as one of the stories of Jesus at least from the second century onwards.<sup>2</sup> Papias of Hierapolis mentions a story where a woman is accused of “many sins” before the Lord, and that the story is found in the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*.<sup>3</sup> The second-century *Protoevangelium Jacobi* likely alludes to the *Pericope Adulterae* and makes direct textual references to it.<sup>4</sup> Later, there is a clear reference to the pericope with no mark that it is different from other (canonical) stories about Jesus in *Didascalia Apostolorum* in the early third century.<sup>5</sup> The first Greek appearance of the text of the *Pericope Adulterae* is in the Codex D,<sup>6</sup> but Jerome comments that the passage is present in many Greek and Latin manuscripts in his day.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the text had circulated early, probably already in the oral period, was possibly written in the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, and was accepted by many (at least from Papias onwards) as a truthful account on Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Therefore we can, at least tentatively, attempt to make judgments on the text as a possible reference to the events in the life of the historical Jesus.

As the interpretation affects the discussion of historicity, one cannot address the issue fully before going through the process of interpretation – not least because the interpretation of the passage has proven to be problematic with numerous suggestions of what happened. Therefore, I will first sketch how the event would have taken place if it happened in the way it is now recorded. I will build on Kenneth E. Bailey's suggested reconstruction of the situation,<sup>9</sup> and develop it further. After that, I will evaluate the probability and historicity of the passage.

## 2 Understanding the Situation

In the pericope, Jesus is depicted as teaching in the temple, and being followed by a large crowd. The Scribes and the Pharisees interrupt Jesus' teaching and bring in a woman, caught in the very act of adultery (ἐπ' αὐτοφώρῳ μοιχευομένη). The expression is important: as she was caught in the act, it presumes that there were

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7:53-8:11). The Text”, *BSac* 136 (1979), pp. 318–332 (320); idem., “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John Part 8. The Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11). Exposition”, *BSac* 137 (1980), pp. 41–53 (49–50); A. F. Johnson, “A Stylistic Trait of the Fourth Gospel in the Pericope Adulterae?”, *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 9 (1966), pp. 91–96 (95–96); A. A. Trites, “The Woman Taken in Adultery”, *BSac* 131 (1974), pp. 137–146 (146).

- 2 J. W. Knust, “Jesus, an Adulteress, and the Development of Christian Scripture”, J.-J. Aubert (ed.) *A Tall Order: Writing the Social History of the Ancient World* (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 216; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), pp. 59–84 (62).
- 3 Knust, “Adulteress”, pp. 67–68, even though Knust comments that it is not clear whether Papias or Eusebius (in whose writing the reference is found) made the reference to the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*. Similarly Ehrman, “Adulteress”, p. 29.
- 4 Knust, “Adulteress”, pp. 68–69.
- 5 Knust, “Adulteress”, pp. 70–71.
- 6 Köstenberger, *John*, p. 247.
- 7 Hodges, “Adultery: Text”, p. 330; Jerome, *The Dialogue Against the Pelagians*, 2:17.
- 8 Concerning Ehrman's (“Adulteress”, pp. 34–38) proposal that there were two stories that conflated into the present canonical form, see criticism in C. Keith, “Recent and Previous Research on the Pericope Adulterae (John 7.53–8.11)”, *Currents in Biblical Research* 6 (2008), pp. 377–404 (387).
- 9 Bailey, *Jesus*, pp. 227–238.

the two witnesses required by the Law.<sup>10</sup> The case is clear: according to the Law, the woman should be killed.<sup>11</sup> What is Jesus' opinion of the situation?

The question was intended to trap Jesus, as the anonymous author comments. The purpose was to ask Jesus' opinion on the issue and use the answer against him.<sup>12</sup> Even though the exact nature of the test might require speculation, here are some comments that are usually made. Jesus could not argue that the case was unproven, as there were the two witnesses required by the Mosaic Law. Usually it is claimed that, had Jesus appealed for mercy, he would have been accused for abandoning the Mosaic Law.<sup>13</sup> Even though it is not so clear that Jesus would have faced charges for supporting a more lenient interpretation of the Law, he would still have ended up in a legal disputation, which his enemies were trained for, while he was not; they probably wished to discredit him publicly. It is also claimed that had Jesus chosen to stone the woman, he would first have had to contradict his teachings on the inclusion of sinners, and second, he would have been accused of illegal mob action as Roman law did not even allow for capital punishment in cases of adultery.<sup>14</sup> Even though in most cases the Romans would likely have cared little, the religious elite could still have used the situation as a reason to get the Roman authorities involved.<sup>15</sup> Jesus was already a suspicious figure to Rome, a disciple of the beheaded John the Baptist, and followed by large crowds. Had he encouraged zeal for the Law in the temple area, there was always the possibility that the event would have been interpreted as a mob action and a threat to the imperial order.<sup>16</sup> There were few good answers in that situation.

## 2.1 Jesus' First Reaction

After hearing the challenge, Jesus stooped down and started writing on the ground. The proposed explanations found in literature (both ancient and modern) concentrate either on the message written or the act of writing.<sup>17</sup> There are numerous suggestions of what Jesus wrote (the sins or names of the accusers is a common guess),<sup>18</sup> but the basic problem is that the content is not reported.<sup>19</sup> Other

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10 Lev. 20:10; Deut. 17:6–7; 19:15; 22:22–24. Baylis, “Adultery”, p. 178; C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary: Volume 1* (2 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), p. 736; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (The New Century Bible Commentary; reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 308; Michaels, *John*, p. 495.

11 Deut. 22:22; Keener, *John*, p. 736; Lindars, *John*, p. 308.

12 Bernard, *John*, p. 717.

13 Baylis, “Adultery”, p. 178 even believes that Jesus could have been accused of being a false prophet.

14 Keener, *John*, pp. 736–737; Lindars, *John*, p. 309; S. A. James, “The Adulteress and the Death Penalty”, *JETS* 22 (1979), pp. 45–53 (50); contra Michaels, *John*, p. 496.

15 Bernard, *John*, p. 718.

16 As the events of the Passover in Cumanus' reign (48 – ca. 52 CE) later show, sometimes there was needed only a little trigger to ignite a harsh reaction and bloodshed, cf. Josephus *Bell.* 2:227–228.

17 In this article I will concentrate on interpretations that take seriously the possibility that the event does go back to the life situation of Jesus. Therefore, I will not interact with interpretations that presuppose that the present event is not historical and treat it purely as a literary creation. The reason will be evident in the section on historicity.

18 First suggested by Jerome, *Dialogus contra Pelagianos* 2.17; see D. O. Voss, “The Sins of Each One of Them”, *ATR* 15 (1933), 321–323 (322). There are also numerous other interpretations: Keith, “Litera-

suggestions concentrate on the act itself:<sup>20</sup> Jesus indicates that the situation is a trap and refuses to participate in the action,<sup>21</sup> he was cooling his anger, buying time to think, pretending not to hear, indicating that his words are found written in the Law,<sup>22</sup> or attempting to resemble a Roman judge writing his sentence before saying it out loud.<sup>23</sup> One likely possibility is that it is an act of refusal: Jesus recognizes the trap and disagrees to be part of the situation.<sup>24</sup> It is at least likely that the situation was interpreted that way by the accusers as they kept questioning him. However, it is questionable whether the precise purpose of Jesus' action is recoverable.<sup>25</sup> In our case it is enough to notice that whatever Jesus wrote or however he wished his action to be understood, it is not significant for the continuation of the situation: the accusers kept questioning him.<sup>26</sup>

As Jesus straightened himself, he answered only ὁ ἀναμάρτητος ὑμῶν πρῶτος ἐπ' αὐτὴν βαλέτω λίθον. After this he stooped down again. This made the accusers stop their questioning and go away. Jesus' words are enigmatic, and their effect is even more perplexing. Why is there the demand of sinlessness? There is no such demand in the Law. Why was this new condition accepted by the enemies as valid? Whatever happened, it made the enemies leave.

## 2.2 Suggested Expositions

There are different ways of interpreting the dynamics of the situation and the meaning of ἀναμάρτητος. I will next present different reconstructions that deal with Jesus' demand and the reason why the accusers left. Most of the expositions of individual authors are combinations of the elements listed below, and it is not always easy to differentiate how various authors emphasize different elements in their accounts.

The proposed fourteen expositions can roughly be divided into five categories. The expositions concentrate either on 1) a legal demand for sinlessness, 2) the guilt that stops the action, 3) surfacing of false motives, 4) technical details that prevent the accusers from proceeding, or 5) situational factors that turned the tables.

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cy", pp. 10–19 lists a total of 36 suggestions of the words or the meaning of the action.

- 19 G. R. O'Day, "John 7:53–8:11: A Study of Misreading", *JBL* 111 (1992), 631–640 (635–636). Keener, *John*, pp. 737–738 rightly asks that if the content of the words was important to understanding the event, why were they not included in the transmission of the tradition.
- 20 Baylis, "Adultery", p. 179; O'Day, "Misreading", p. 632; E. Power, "Writing on the Ground (Joh. 8, 6. 8)", *Bib* 2 (1921), pp. 54–57 (57).
- 21 O'Day, "Misreading", p. 632.
- 22 Baylis, "Adultery", p. 180, or that *he* was the Law-giver in the first place, see Hodges, "Adultery: Exposition", p. 46.
- 23 T. W. Manson, "The Pericope de Adultera (Joh. 7.53 – 8.11) A Footnote to the Article by Professor Jeremias ZNW 43 (1950/51) 145–150", *ZNW* 43 (1952), pp. 255–256; contra Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 146; on the suggestions, see again Keith, "Literacy", pp. 14–17.
- 24 Versions in Bernard, *John*, p. 719; Harrison, "Adultery", p. 435; Lindars, *John*, p. 310; F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina 4; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 261; O'Day, "Misreading", p. 633.
- 25 Moloney, *John*, p. 261; Morris, *John*, p. 784.
- 26 As O'Day, "Misreading", p. 636 reminds, the accusers respond to what they hear, not to what they read.

### 2.2.1 Technical Demand for Sinlessness

The first category consists of interpretations that take the demand of sinlessness literally. (1) *Jesus presented a legal demand that only the sinless can accuse and judge others, and the accusers understood that they were not qualified.* The accusers felt that Jesus' demand was, for some reason, reasonable, and as they recognized their own general human sinfulness, they left.<sup>27</sup>

In any case, this "literal" interpretation must be regarded as untenable. Had Jesus demanded such a thing, it would have been easy to rebut: it was not required by the Law of Moses,<sup>28</sup> and nobody but God is blameless. Instead, indisputably, Moses did demand that adulterers be stoned – and the question would have been repeated.

One suggestion related to this is Bailey's sub-claim that (2) *it would have been shameful to claim to be sinless, and therefore throwing the first stone, thus making a self-claim of sinlessness, would have been a shameful act.*<sup>29</sup> However, this would require that Jesus' demand of sinlessness was already accepted as valid, and as we saw, that is unlikely.

### 2.2.2 Guilt Forcing the Accusers to Retreat

The second group of interpretations does not take the demand of sinlessness as a legal term but concentrates on the accusers' feelings of guilt and the realization that they, too, were sinners, and not in a position to judge the woman. What is similar to most of the cases is that (3) *the accusers saw that they were sinners and could not push their case anymore.* This would not have anything to do with Mosaic Law but with a personal sense of right and wrong. It is usually thought that Jesus' comment of sinlessness caught the accusers by surprise, and they suddenly had to face their own sinfulness.<sup>30</sup> For the accusers, it was a moment of seeing themselves clearly, and they were ashamed of what they saw. They were not brave enough to apologize but were honest enough to leave.

In all the expositions of this category, the accusers recognized that they, too, were sinners, and they had to drop their case: even if they were able to condemn the woman on legal grounds, it would not be morally possible. They were sinners, just like her. This suggestion is echoed in a later scribal addition in verse 9 ("being convicted by their conscience" ὑπὸ τῆς συνειδήσεως ἐλεγχόμενοι).<sup>31</sup>

It is sometimes thought that the accusers realized that they were treating the woman in a harsh way. The accusers were moved to pity for the harsh treatment, public exposure, and humiliation of the woman. Jesus opened their eyes to see that

27 Punch, "Theories", p. 95; at least somehow in Bruce, *John*, p. 416.

28 Cf. Baylis, "Adultery", p. 172; Hodges, "Adultery: Exposition", p. 47.

29 Bailey, *Jesus*, p. 235.

30 Harrison, "Adultery", p. 435–436 ("touching the conscience of man to the quick... shifting the attention to the moral fitness of the accusers"). Also R. L. Fredrikson, *John* (The Communicator's Commentary 4; Waco: Word Books, 1985), p. 154.

31 B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2nd edn, 1994), p. 190.

this woman, too, was also a human being.

Different expositions in this category elaborate some of the elements that would explain why the accusers were ready to abandon their case. One is that (4) *they also recognized that they, too, lusted to do similarly as the woman had done* – possibly with the woman they had captured, as Barclay suggests – and were convicted by their lust.<sup>32</sup>

The interpretations presented above are, however, improbable. The Pharisees were religious elite known for their strict religious observance. As they rightly saw themselves as brilliant Jews, it is not probable that they would have seen themselves as being sinners just like the woman (emphatically, woman<sup>33</sup>) caught in the very act of adultery. This interpretation seems to rest more on a Christian understanding of personal sinfulness and the presupposition that Jews were feeling guilty under the pressure of the Law than on Pharisaic notion of (self)righteousness. It is also questionable that their “inner humanists” were awakened: for them, the woman was a Law-breaker and deserved her punishment; she was not to be pitied because of her crime. It is less likely that they identified with her. If the account was a later Christian fiction, the demand of sinlessness, as interpreted in the cases above, would have been more likely. However, that would presume the passage to be unhistorical.

A specific and popular suggestion within this second group is one that attempts to evade the problems associated with guilt-related interpretations: (5) *the accusers were adulterers too*. It was much easier for men to have extramarital sexual relations, escape the consequences, and live a respectable life.<sup>34</sup> The variations would be that the accusers (or at least some of them) had had sex with prostitutes, unmarried girls, or with married women, or they had repeatedly divorced. According to this view, the accusers realized that if they judged the woman, they should judge themselves too.

In any case, these interpretations rest on the assumption that the accusers had themselves engaged in extramarital sex. A problem with this interpretation is that it

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32 W. Barclay, *The Gospel of John: Volume 2* (The New Daily Study Bible; 2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. 4, with the idea that Jesus wrote their sins or something against them. He argues that “without sin” could include the meaning “without a sinful desire”.

33 The women were seen as essentially more prone to sin, especially sexual sins.

34 Hypothesized in Schilling, “Adulteress”, p. 98 (“being transgressors on some counts, possibly even on the very count of the charge.”). Moloney, *John*, p. 261 suggests a “sin in the sexual area.” Keener, *John*, pp. 738, 738 n. 336 speculates on the possibility: “reversing charges was a standards rhetorical practice... if one accused could show that his accusers shared complicity in a matter that turned out badly, he could often force the withdrawal of their complaint. ... It may be that Jesus... shows that the witnesses themselves lack integrity and the case should therefore be dismissed.” Also hypothesized in Bruce, *John*, p. 416: “He simply rules that only those who were guiltless themselves (guiltless, presumably, with respect to this particular category of sin) could with any propriety take the responsibility of carrying out the sentence,” even though Bruce’s interpretation comes close to the demand of sinlessness. See also D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 334 speculates “It [Jesus’ words] means... that they must not be guilty of this particular sin.” Also Hodges, “Adultery: Exposition”, p. 48: “it would be equally absurd to imagine that she could be stoned by any who shared her special sin. Obviously, an adulteress could not be executed by adulterers!” He also speculates that if the story is connected to the Feast of Tabernacles, there were plenty of opportunities to have sex with strangers.

requires that the men in an androcentric and patriarchal culture would have identified with the woman and come to see their actions, albeit possibly in accordance with their interpretation of the Torah, as evil. A pious Jew could at least have been divorced, but it was still a long way from identifying with an adulteress. However, the greater problem is that, even though this scenario is theoretically possible, there is no hint of that in the text<sup>35</sup> nor any indication of Jesus' awareness of their past sexual behavior.

### 2.2.3 False Motives Exposed

The third group of expositions is actually a sub-category from the guilt-related interpretations: it concentrates on the accusers' realization that they have false motives concerning the situation. One exposition in this class is that (6) *the accusers saw their own hypocrisy as they were using the woman to trap Jesus*. They realized that they were hypocrites and not in a position to judge others.<sup>36</sup> The world "sinlessness" would refer to "personal integrity before God in the matter at hand."<sup>37</sup> The accusers started doubting their own integrity. As the woman's situation was used only to trap Jesus, not to fulfill the Law, the accusers felt convicted and dropped their case.

Nevertheless, this interpretation is problematic when it attempts to explain the effect. First, the Law does not address the motives of the witnesses but their truthfulness. Whatever they attempted to do with Jesus did not affect their case against the woman. Second, the accusers' point of view to the story is different: they were using a sinner and her situation (which was despicable to begin with) to trap a politically dangerous opponent, who was a threat to national security. It is too much to presume that they saw this action as unethical. For them, their motives were as clear as they could be with those who were involved in politics.

There is also a more developed view of the present exposition: (7) *the woman was set up in a trap and brought before Jesus*. The woman and her lover were followed, and the witnesses were watching in hiding.<sup>38</sup> James and Derrett speculate on the possibility that the woman's husband organized a trap for the woman to not allow her to divorce and to be able to inherit her property. The accusers were in place before the extramarital intercourse took place, and they were more interested in catching the woman than warning her or saving her.<sup>39</sup> This reconstruction would explain the presence of the witnesses of the adultery, as there rarely happened to be two independent witnesses of the act. When Jesus

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35 Baylis, "Adultery", pp. 181–182 n. 36.

36 Suggested by Beasley-Murray, *John*, pp. 146–147 ("Jesus challenged their behavior, their motives -- and they failed the test"). James, "Adulteress", pp. 49–52 (51): "The integrity of the witnesses in this case could be challenged on a number of grounds, one of them being their malevolent desire to trap Jesus." Tasker, *John*, pp. 111–112, too, accuses the accusers of hypocrisy. Cf. also O'Day, "Misreading", pp. 637–638.

37 Michaels, *John*, pp. 496–498 belongs to this category, even though Michaels does not specify whether he refers to the releasing of the man, the false motives, or other sins.

38 See J. D. M. Derrett, "Law in the New Testament: The Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery", *NTS* 10 (1963), pp. 1–26 (5–8); James, "Adulteress", pp. 48, 51. To some extent also in Brown, *John*, p. 338.

39 James, "Adulteress", pp. 48, 51.

commented on sinlessness, the accusers realized that they had false motives concerning the woman. However, one cannot logically move from a claim that it is unlikely that there were two witnesses to a claim that this proves the detailed plan against the woman. Moreover, it is not significant *how* the witnesses were there, but *that* they happened to be there. It is questionable whether or not it would have legally made the extramarital affair less weighty. Also, once again, Jesus' knowledge of the situation should be explained.

#### 2.2.4 Real or Technical Reasons to Abandon the Case

The fourth group consists of explanations that claim that there were technical reasons that would have kept the accusers from proceeding. The first one is a version of the case of the false motives: (8) *The witnesses were "malicious" and therefore disqualified*. Baylis makes a case that the reference of the sinlessness is a comment that they were not righteous but "malicious witnesses," and the Law would have required that they would be punished with the same punishment they sought for the woman. It was not just that they felt convicted; had they wanted to proceed, they should have been stoned.<sup>40</sup> The witnesses were "malicious" in that they disregarded justice and were using the situation against Jesus. However, the problem with this exposition seems to be that "a malicious witness" in the Mosaic Law is made to mean "a witness without pure motives,"<sup>41</sup> even though a more likely interpretation of the Old Testament text or its contemporary understanding is that the reference is to false witnesses.

Another version is that (9) *the adulterous man was in conspiracy with the accusers, and the accusers were actually Law-breakers*. Tenney speculates that the male perpetrator was possibly in alliance with the accusers, and he was standing with the witnesses.<sup>42</sup> He knew that there was a need to trap Jesus, so as he had a chance to have an extramarital relation, he organized witnesses in the room and seduced the girl. The reluctance of the witnesses to execute the woman would be understandable because that would also require the death of one of the accusers. Nevertheless, as appealing as this conspiracy theory is, this scenario requires special circumstances that are not mentioned and are less easily derived from the details that are given. While this case is technically possible, there is no hint of this.

(10) *The male perpetrator was released and thus the accusers were Law-breakers, who were not in a position to judge the woman*. James suggests that the accusers had released the male perpetrator because of favoritism or bribery, and this made the accusers Law-breakers.<sup>43</sup> This would be evident because of the often-

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40 Baylis, "Adultery", pp. 180–182. See Deut. 19:16–19, 21. A notion connected to this is that if the story of the woman "(falsely) accused of many sins before the Lord" in Papias (referred in Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.17) is identified with the *Pericope Adulterae*, something similar to this would be suggested, at least if the word διαβάλλω is translated as "accuse falsely" or "slander". See Knust, "Adulteress", pp. 67–68.

41 See esp. Baylis, "Adultery", p. 181 n. 35

42 Speculated in M. C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John", F. E. Gæbelein (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 9* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 3–203 (90).

43 Speculated by James, "Adulteress", pp. 51–52. He speculates on the possibility that the male perpetrator was released because of bribery. Similarly in Derrett, "Adultery", p. 7



mentioned fact that the man is missing. It is possible that the man was allowed to leave, as they only wanted to get the woman: in a male-dominated culture, the sexual misconduct of women was treated as more serious than that of men. However, there is no evidence that this must be the case. It is possible, but hypothetical, and lacks evidence. Also, I would suggest not reading too much into the account from the fact that the man is missing. Even if the accusers were seriously attempting to get the man, it is possible that he was able to run away. Forcing one person (a weaker one) to stay against her will is easier than to get two people to stay.

A version of the interpretation of false motives is that (11) *as the witnesses did not warn the woman beforehand, their witness was technically disqualified*.<sup>44</sup> Morris claims that according to interpretations of the Law in question, the witnesses were eligible only if they had warned the person beforehand, and the person would still have persisted with her sin. If the witnesses failed to give a warning to the woman (and in this case it would be unlikely as they just wanted to catch her), she could not have been judged on their testimony.<sup>45</sup> The accusers realized this, were convicted, and left. However, the requirement is likely a later interpretation of the Torah and not contemporary with Jesus.<sup>46</sup> Therefore this cannot be the reason for disqualifying the witnesses.<sup>47</sup>

### 2.2.5 Jesus' Answer Turning the Tables

The fifth category is made up of expositions that attempt to reinterpret the whole situation and its dynamics. The first exposition is that (12) *the woman was not an adulterer but a remarried divorcée, and the whole issue was about Jesus' coherency with his teaching*. Watson suggests that Jesus taught that divorcing is adultery, and therefore, as the divorcées remarry, they commit adultery. Jesus is asked to bring his case to its logical conclusion: if the divorcée had committed adultery, Jesus ought to condemn her to death.<sup>48</sup> The trap here was that Jesus would comment also on Herod Antipas' marriage.<sup>49</sup> As Jesus spoke of the "sinless one", he was referring to the ex-husband. Even though the ex-husband would have been there, he would not have been willing to stone her, and Jesus redirected the blame from the woman to the ex-husband.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the accusers had no choice but to leave.

Even though this interpretation offers a novel way of looking at the dynamics of

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44 Morris, *John*, p. 784; Derrett, "Adultery", pp. 13–16.

45 Morris, *John*, p. 784 "If, for example, the witnesses were guilty of not giving a warning... then the woman could not be convicted on their evidence."

46 James, "Adulteress", p. 51.

47 Derrett ("Adultery", p. 7–8) adds that part of the guilt of the witnesses is that they didn't stop the crime they were about to witness (Page 8: "The whole affair reeks of doubt, but the witnesses' sin in not attempting to prevent what might easily have been prevented admits of little doubt."). However, this presumes that the witnesses were watching in hiding already before the couple entered the room, which is not something we can assume. And even if the witnesses didn't stop the couple, this does not negate the fact that they were there and were able to act as witnesses.

48 A. Watson, "Jesus and the Adulteress", *Bib* 80 (1999), pp. 100–108 (102–104).

49 Watson, "Adulteress", p. 106.

50 Watson, "Adulteress", pp. 103–104.

the situation, the woman's status as a divorcée is questionable. Would the accusers have taken the woman from her home and risked her reputation and the present husband's revenge? Also, the woman did not act in a way that would suggest that she thought that she was treated unlawfully; her answer in 8:11 includes neither protest nor anger toward Jesus, who was the reason for her maltreatment. Also, Jesus' view of divorce may not have been that straight-forward that he thought that divorce in all thinkable situations would be wrong.<sup>51</sup>

One suggestion is that (13) *the accusers simply realized that if they actually stoned the woman, Jesus' integrity would be saved but theirs lost*. Lindars suggests that as Jesus told the accusers to stone the woman, the accusers understood that if they proceeded, they would appear self-righteous and ruthless, but Jesus would retain his reputation.<sup>52</sup> Thus, their action would not have had the results they sought after. However, it is questionable that zeal for the Law would be viewed as ruthlessness; rather it would have been a sign of righteous zeal. It is likely that the problem lies outside of the questions of reputation.

The last suggestion is that of Hendriksen: (14) *The accusers attempted to receive an answer from Jesus that would give them grounds to trap him, but they were not able to use Jesus' answer, so they had to leave*.<sup>53</sup> Even though Hendriksen is ambiguous between this and some guilt-related interpretations, he still ends up with claiming Jesus' answer outwitted them, as it could not be used as evidence against him.<sup>54</sup> As appealing as this seems, the problem is still that they received an answer that they were seeking because Jesus seems to be offering a death sentence. Therefore, a more thoroughgoing analysis of the situational factors is needed.

### 2.3 The Situational Factors

In attempting to interpret the situation, it is important to know more about the background. Concerning the place, the event is reported to have taken place in ἱερόν. The options were the Court of the Women<sup>55</sup> or the Outer Court.<sup>56</sup> Bruce explains that many of the scribes had teaching-pitches in the Outer Court where they sat and expounded the Law to the pupils, so that would be one possible site.<sup>57</sup> After all, would the Scribes and especially the Pharisees have brought a truly

51 Cf. the classical treatment in D. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

52 Lindars, *John*, p. 311.

53 W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John: Volume 2* (New Testament Commentary; 2 vols., Michigan: Baker Academics, 1983), pp. 33–40, esp. p. 39.

54 Hendriksen, *John*, p. 38: "he showed them that they were not fit to execute the very law they which *ostensibly* they were so eager to carry out!" (italics original). See, however, p. 39, the question which he eventually affirms: "Or was it because they had been outgeneraled (and were now at a loss what to say or what to do), having completely failed to elicit from the lips of Jesus an answer which could form the basis of a charge against him?"

55 Suggested in M. O. Wise, "Temple, Jewish: Temple Origins and Structures", C. E. Evans and S. E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), pp. 1167–1169 (1168).

56 Bruce, *John*, p. 413.

57 Bruce, *John*, p. 413.

unclean woman to the Court of the Women?<sup>58</sup> Therefore, as the Outer Court was allowed even for the Gentiles, it is the most likely place.

As Bailey stresses, it is important to understand the Roman presence in the temple mount.<sup>59</sup> The Tower of Antonia, a Roman military fortress, was connected with a stairway to the outer court of the temple.<sup>60</sup> The Outer Court was surrounded by pillared halls, and the Roman soldiers stood over the colonnade and watched over the crowds.<sup>61</sup> Josephus writes about the setting: “the guard (for there always lay in this tower a Roman legion) went several ways among the cloisters, with their arms, on the Jewish festivals, in order to watch the people, that they might not there attempt to make any innovations.”<sup>62</sup>

The guards were alert because national-religious restlessness erupted usually from the temple area, especially during religious feasts.<sup>63</sup> It is also likely that the situation in our pericope took place during a Jewish festival. Jesus’ main ministry took place in Galilee, and not so much in Judea. The Fourth Gospel reports Jesus visiting the religious festivals in Jerusalem, and even without those reports it is not unnatural to assume that a Jewish man went to the festivals. If Jesus was in the temple, it must be either during one of the festivals (John) or the last week of his life during the Passover season (Synoptics).

As Jesus was teaching, it is likely that there was a crowd gathering around him. Whether the Romans recognized him or not, the situation surely drew their attention. As the religious leaders intervened, the Roman soldiers were likely watching how the situation would develop. They would already have been on their toes for the heightened national-religious atmosphere of the festival and the gathered crowds. Had there been an uproar from either of Jesus’ choices by the ruling elite and the audience (stoning or Law-breaking), there was the real possibility that the Romans would have intervened.<sup>64</sup>

#### 2.4 A Different Interpretation of the Situation

Jesus’ words were most likely to be interpreted formally as a command to start the stoning.<sup>65</sup> This can be seen from the reference to the *πρῶτος ἐπ’ αὐτὴν βαλέτω λίθον*. This has an important reference to the commandment of the Mosaic Law relevant to the situation. Deut. 13:9 and 17:17 contain a reference to the implementing of the capital punishment: the Law demanded that the witnesses were the first to throw the stones; only after that the others would have joined in.<sup>66</sup>

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58 Cf. Josephus, *Apion* 2:8: “all the Jews went into the second court, as well as their wives, when they were free from all uncleanness.”

59 Bailey, *Jesus*, pp. 232–233. Most commentators do not take the Romans into account.

60 E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 3rd edn, 2003). p. 562; Wise, “Temple”, p. 1168.

61 Bailey, *Jesus*, p. 233; Wise, “Temple”, p. 1168.

62 Josephus, *War* 5.5.8, Whiston’s translation.

63 Bailey, *Jesus*, p. 233.

64 However, it is not self-evident. Jesus’ temple demonstration was apparently left undisturbed by the Romans.

65 Bailey, *Jesus*, p. 235; James, “Adulteress”, p. 53; Lindars, *John*, p. 311.

66 Cf. Moloney, *John*, p. 264 n. 7.

This was the requirement of the Law, and the accusers had indicated that the witnesses were standing among them. As Jesus reminded them of this fact, he turned the tables. Jesus' reply was a challenge: this was not about his interpretation of the Law or his Law-observance, but about theirs. Everyone knew the Law, and the Law required them to act.

Jesus' answer can be interpreted in two possible ways. The first one is that Jesus was turning the attention wholly onto the accusers, as if saying, "Everyone knows what the Law says. You are the ones demanded to act, not me. Why do you bother me?" Jesus' writing on the ground could support this: it was a sign that he has nothing to do with the stoning, that he was not even watching. The other possibility is that Jesus actually went further. Bailey argues that Jesus was seemingly ready to fulfill the Mosaic command, to accept the challenge and to order the execution, but challenged the accusers to join him, to participate in the act and in its consequences.<sup>67</sup> "Let's do it. But you are the ones to begin the show. Are you ready?" Either interpretation gives the same result: the answer turned the attention onto the accusers and how they would reply to the challenge.

At this point we have to reflect on what the accusers actually wanted to do and what they could have done in the situation. Most of the interpretations take it for granted that the accusers actually wanted to kill the woman – that they wanted to kill her and would have been able to do so. However, the situation is not so clear-cut. The Roman legislation did not allow for the death sentence in the cases of adultery, and mob lynching is definitely not comparable with an official court procedure.<sup>68</sup> What is even more significant is that it is not clear that the death sentence was thought to be the right solution to the cases of adultery anymore. Instone-Brewer comments that in the early first century the death penalty fell into disuse. According to the Talmud, the death sentence was discontinued "forty years before the destruction of the temple," and forty could be a figurative number.<sup>69</sup> Also, there are no records of official death penalties during the era.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, it is not clear from the start that the accusers actually sought to stone her or that they felt that it would be the right zeal for the Law despite the foreign pressure on them. We cannot, therefore, presume that they really wanted to kill the woman.

On the other hand, even though the Roman law did not allow for capital punishment and the relationship towards capital punishment had become more lenient in Jesus' time, there were still cases where people were killed, usually by mob lynching or by zealous individuals. The Mishnah refers to a priest who was clubbed by fellow priests when he was serving in a state of impurity in the temple.<sup>71</sup> Closer to our topic, the Mishnah tells a story about a priest's daughter who was

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67 Bailey, *Jesus*, p. 235.

68 According to the Roman law, the adulteress and the adulterer were sent to different islands for life; law operative from BCE 19/18. See Ferguson *Backgrounds*, p. 76. However, Michaels, *John*, p. 496 claims that the Jews actually had the right to order a death sentence. Similarly Watson, "Adulteress", p. 101. Even if the situation was so, a mob action during a religious festival would have been questionable.

69 Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, p. 126 n. 156; *b. Sanh.* 41a; *b. Šabb.* 15a.

70 Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, p. 126 n. 156.

71 *m. Sanh.* 9:6.

burned for adultery.<sup>72</sup> The Babylonian Talmud preserves a saying from first century rabbi Eliezer ben Zadok, who claims to having seen the event with his own eyes as a child.<sup>73</sup> The unorthodox mode of the punishment also indicates that the event was a mob lynching.<sup>74</sup> Thus, it is possible that some crimes were punished with mob justice, and it is not unreasonable to believe that there was at least a threat that the woman would have been killed.<sup>75</sup> However, put negatively, it does not mean that it is self-evident that the Scribes and Pharisees, who enjoyed at least some political prestige, would have risked their status.

As the question cannot be answered easily, we have to divide our discussion to two alternative scenarios: the first alternative is that *the accusers were really not about to kill the woman*. They just wanted to challenge Jesus in a dramatic way. As Jesus, however, challenged them to proceed, they knew that they cannot. They should have fought against the tide of the Roman law and the changed interpretation of Mosaic Law of their age. In this scenario, the stoning was out of the question right from the start.

Another scenario is that *the accusers were ready to kill the woman*. They were ready to stone the woman from the beginning, and even if they were not, they thought about it as a real alternative after hearing Jesus' answer. In this scenario, the event was about mob justice. The basic answer to Jesus' charge would have been to stone the woman and save one's face. However, as Bailey argues, in this case, had the accusers proceeded with the stoning, they would have invoked problems on themselves: the key thing is that the Romans were watching and were probably on their toes, ready for any troubles. The accusers were not prepared to face the possible consequences of the act.<sup>76</sup> Even though Baylis comments that the Romans would likely have done nothing had they stoned the woman,<sup>77</sup> stirring up an illegal mob action in the temple in the middle of a religious festival is always precarious, at least when the suppressed religious elite is involved. Thus, the accusers pondered on killing the woman but they realized that they cannot.

In both scenarios, it is still noteworthy that the accusers got one of the "wrong" answers from Jesus, that Jesus accepted the stoning. Why, then, did the opponents not react as they most likely were intending to do? Hendriksen claimed that they could not use this answer, but, nevertheless, it is a direct command to stone her. Why did they not use it against him? The reason is likely that the accusers were probably thrown off balance. They never expected Jesus to choose the stoning.<sup>78</sup> The situation was so unexpected that the accusers did not have a behavioral script.<sup>79</sup> They likely expected Jesus to start giving reasons why she should not be stoned, and they would have put on a good show to shame him. Now Jesus had

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72 *m. Sanh.* 7:2.

73 *m. Sanh.* 7:2; *b. Sanh.* 52b.

74 Burning instead of strangulation, see Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, p. 126 n. 156.

75 Keener, *John*, pp. 736, 736 n. 316; Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, p. 126 n. 156.

76 Bailey, *Jesus*, p. 235, which, in my opinion, is a more likely explanation than that of Lindars, *John*, p. 311.

77 Baylis, "Adultery", p. 178 n. 23; similarly in Watson, "Adulteress", p. 101.

78 See Morris, *John*, p. 783, who comments that Jesus was rather known of his leniency.

79 Compare to the question on paying taxes, Mark 12:14–17, especially verse 17.

turned the tables, and they were in the situation that they should have started giving reasons for saving the woman and themselves. Even though they surely were able to offer an interpretation that would have shown that they do not have to follow Moses rigidly, it would have been of no use. They had already lost their momentum, and now they were forced to stay on the defensive. They found themselves in the position they had designed for Jesus.

In the changed situation, the accusers had little hope of prevailing. First of all they noticed that their original plan was of no use. In addition, had they attempted to continue, it would have involved risks. They were in the middle of a large crowd sympathetic towards Jesus. Their action was likely to cause a reaction in the audience. As there was the possibility of an uproar, the possible consequences were to be calculated. Now the attention focused on the accusers, not on Jesus – they were the witnesses who demanded the death sentence. Had there been uproar and had anyone in the crowd been questioned, the finger would have been pointing to the witnesses. Even though there was no surety of Roman intervention, why risk it? The accusers left as they had no means of accomplishing what they were there for.

We are left with the question, Did Jesus really mean that the woman should be stoned? Jesus' relationship toward the Law and women shows that he felt empathy toward sinners and women.<sup>80</sup> It is, therefore, possible to claim that Jesus was concentrating mostly on evading the trap, and that he did not take a stand on the woman's judgment (or death penalty in general) in the first place. Jesus' dialogue with the woman shows that Jesus was not at least sorry for the fact that, as a by-product of the events, the woman was freed from charges and further public humiliation. Hence, it is likely that, when pronouncing the judgment, Jesus was aware that nobody would fulfill it.

## 2.5 The Sinless One

There is still one mystery to be solved. What does ἀνὰμάρτητος mean?<sup>81</sup> It is hard to believe that it is an actual reference to sinlessness, but what is it about? One possible way to solve the problem would be to speculate that Jesus originally referred to the witnesses rather than the sinless – that would have made perfect sense in this interpretation – and the word was later changed in the transmission of the tradition. However, there is no textual evidence for this suggestion to give us firm ground to start with, and more importantly, the strict attitude towards adultery in the early church<sup>82</sup> would have more easily accepted the reference to the witnesses than a rejection of the punishment. If the charge was rejected by formal grounds in the passage, it would have given better reasons to uphold the

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80 Cf. Bernard, *John*, p. 716; Blomberg, *Reliability*, p. 140; Lindars, *John*, p. 306.

81 Though I believe Bailey's (*Jesus*, p. 235) recognition of the role of the witnesses is accurate, I differ from his explanation that nobody wanted to claim to be sinless and if someone would have done so, it would have been so striking and so shameful that it would have been remembered; it would have prevented people from being able to dissolve into the crowd and it would have made it easy to remember who was the first to throw the stone when the Romans would have intervened.

82 See Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 143; Bridges, "Canonical", p. 216.

ecclesiastical punishments for adultery.

If the word is historical, a likely interpretation could be found from the direction that “sinless” would refer not to an abstract sinlessness, but to moral uprightness. Nevertheless, as noted above, Jesus’ answer cannot be made to mean only moral uprightness (see the problems with guilt-related expositions). A more likely interpretation of the word and its meaning is that Jesus’ reference is an ironic remark to the accusers’ intentions. As they were to show that Jesus was making compromises with the Law, Jesus comments that now it is the time to show that they, the sinless and the upright, are to prove their status. If they are to be the sinless keepers of the Covenant, they – not him – are expected to throw the first stone. The intended meaning would be comparable to modern “Mr. Perfect.”

It is likely that the words are ambiguous on purpose: the enigmatic nature of the words would also have been an element that made the accusers stop and think about a possible reply. As they comprehended what Jesus meant, they had already lost their motion, and did not know how to master the situation again.

There is, still, one counter-argument that needs to be addressed. The reference to the ἀναμάρτητος is in singular, and Watson suggests that this implies only one person is meant by this.<sup>83</sup> This would be incoherent with the suggestion that the reference is to the two witnesses. However, even though there were probably two witnesses, the question is about the first stone, so the emphasis is on the one who must act first, not on the number of the witnesses. You cannot throw the first stone twice.

### 3 Historicity

When considering the historicity of the situation, the traditional criteria of authenticity<sup>84</sup> are helpful tools, despite the criticism they have received lately.<sup>85</sup> The formal Criterion of Implausibility is useful in deciding whether an action is plausible in Jesus’ context: if something is not plausible in Jesus’ context, it is likely unhistorical.<sup>86</sup> Some argue that the event is incredible in Jesus’ situation because there was no possibility for capital punishment in the case of adultery, but as mentioned above, mob lynching was still possible.

Among the factors speaking for the authenticity of the situation, it can be counted that there are no miraculous elements.<sup>87</sup> In *Pericope Adulterae*, Jesus is presented in a way that is characteristic of him in many respects.<sup>88</sup> He is critical towards the religious elite that opposes the sinners, and is in clash with the religious leaders.<sup>89</sup>

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83 Watson, “Adulteress”, p. 103.

84 See classical treatment in J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and Person* (New York: Doubleday), pp. 167–195.

85 See C. Keith and A. Le Donne (eds.), *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T & T Clark, 2012).

86 The negative criteria are suggested, for example, in T. Holmén, *Jesus and Jewish Covenant Thinking* (Turku: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2001), p. 35.

87 Lindars, *John*, p. 306.

88 This is traditionally referred as the Criterion of Coherence, see Meier, *Marginal*, pp. 176–177.

89 Blomberg, *Reliability*, p. 140; Burge, “Problem”, p. 145.

He is in direct opposition to the traditional defenders of Mosaic tradition,<sup>90</sup> and the familiar theme of Jesus and the Law is repeated.<sup>91</sup> The story resembles Synoptic conflict stories, and especially the question of paying taxes to the Emperor.<sup>92</sup> Also, even though Jesus appears to accept the death sentence of the woman in order to win his case, he is then pictured as compassionate towards the sinner, a theme repeated in the Synoptics.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, Jesus' characteristically positive relationship with women, even sinful women, is repeated.<sup>94</sup> In sum, Jesus' actions in the *Pericope Adulterae* is very characteristic of Jesus.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the criticism the Criterion of (Double) Dissimilarity has received,<sup>96</sup> it may still give useful hints in this case. Jesus' actions and view in the *Pericope Adulterae*, according to the suggested interpretation, are radically different from the earlier Jewish and later Christian views on adultery.<sup>97</sup> The view of women in Judaism was negative, even though there are some positive examples.<sup>98</sup> In any case, punishment was required for adultery. Also, in this case Jesus is lenient towards the adulterous woman, an attitude that is different from the stern discipline of the developing church.<sup>99</sup> The post-apostolic church had strict and increasingly rule-based ethics.<sup>100</sup> Severe punishments for adultery were required in the second and third centuries, as that separated the church's ethic from that of the pagans'.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, coming up with an alternative *Sitz im Leben* is hard. Also, as the Roman legislation did not allow stoning or other death sentences in the case of adultery, the further removed from Palestine the situation of writing the story, the less likely the creation of the story.

One of the factors speaking for the authenticity of the event is the fact that it is connected to Jesus' struggle with the religious elite. Jesus' death on the cross is very likely historical, and that begs for an explanation. As Meier suggests, a total reconstruction of Jesus that explains his violent death is to be preferred.<sup>102</sup> In

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90 Moloney, *John*, p. 262.

91 Burge, "Problem", p. 145.

92 Brown, *John*, p. 335; Lindars, *John*, p. 308.

93 Bernard, *John*, p. 716; Blomberg, *Reliability*, p. 140; Lindars, *John*, p. 306.

94 Cf. B. Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (reprint; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 125–131.

95 Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 143. Some suggest that Jesus' forgiveness of sins with his own authority is repeated here, cf. Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 147; Burge, "Problem", p. 145; Moloney, *John*, p. 262. However, Jesus is not here pronouncing forgiveness of her sins, cf. Michaels, *John*, p. 500; Morris, *John*, p. 786.

96 See Meier, *Marginal*, pp. 171–174, 188–189. For criticism, see T. Holmén, "Doubts About Double Dissimilarity", B. D. Chilton and C. A. Evans (eds.), *Authenticating the Words of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 47–80; G. Theissen and D. Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria*. (transl. M. E. Boring; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), D. Winter, "Saving the Quest for Authenticity from the Criterion of Dissimilarity: History and Plausibility", Keith and Le Donne, *Demise of Authenticity*, pp. 115–131.

97 Blomberg, *Reliability*, p. 140; Bridges, "Canonical", p. 216.

98 Witherington, *Women*, pp. 1–10.

99 Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 143.

100 Bridges, "Canonical", p. 216.

101 Bernard, *John*, p. 2:716; Blomberg, *Reliability*, p. 140; Morris, *John*, p. 779.

102 Meier, *Marginal*, p. 177 as the Criterion of Rejection and Execution.



*Pericope Adulterae*, Jesus is presented as shaming the religious authorities in public, which is a certain way of getting into serious trouble.<sup>103</sup> With all of the evidence combined, the reported incident very likely goes back to Jesus.<sup>104</sup>

#### 4 Significance

There are some elements that make it likely that the situation took place in the last week of Jesus' life.<sup>105</sup> First, the first verses make a reference to Jesus lodging in the Olivet (8:1), similar to (though not exclusively) the description of the last week.<sup>106</sup> Second, Jesus is ready to teach in the capital area and more precisely in the temple, not only in more remote areas or small towns, as earlier in his career. Third, the hostile intent of the religious elite refers to a time when they were willing to confront him publicly and possibly get him into trouble with the Romans – so much so that they were willing to act in the temple area with all the authority possible: the Pharisees joined by the scribes. Even if one would not accept the placement of the event occurring in the last week, it still probably takes place late in Jesus' career.

As mentioned above, Jesus' death is an element that needs to be explained. Jesus' demonstration in the temple can be viewed as one of the reasons for the crucifixion.<sup>107</sup> Whatever Jesus' reason for his action,<sup>108</sup> it is usually thought that the demonstration was the last straw that forced the elite to get rid of him.

My tentative suggestion is that the *Pericope Adulterae* is to be added with the temple demonstration in explaining the events of Jesus' last week. If Jesus' demonstration in the temple is dated to the time when Jesus visits Judea for the last time, the events would logically take place after the incident. If so, the *pericope* likely presents one of the attempts of the religious elite to disgrace Jesus and to get a reason for the Romans to seize him. Jesus is publicly challenged by the elite, but the challenge turns to his favor – and to the public humiliation of his enemies. Even though the temple incident was a public and possibly a more extreme action, the events described in the *Pericope Adulterae*, according to the suggested interpretation, consist of a public humiliation in the home area of the religious elite. This would have given them personal reasons to get rid of Jesus.

If the event took place in the last week of Jesus' life, it fits into the overall picture

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103 Bailey, *Jesus*, p. 236. This does not imply that Meier's criterion can be applied to this single passage, but it is credible to claim that Jesus most probably had serious troubles with the religious elite.

104 Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 143; Bridges, "Canonical", p. 216; Bruce, *John*, p. 413; Harrison, "Adultery", p. 432; Lindars, *John*, pp. 305–306; Morris, *John*, p. 779; O'Day, "Misreading", p. 639.

105 Brown, *John*, p. 332; Bruce, *John*, p. 413; Harrison, "Adultery", p. 432; Schilling, "Adulteress", pp. 92, 95; Tasker, *John*, p. 110.

106 Luke 21:37; 22:39. See Michaels, *John*, p. 494. This is, of course, not decisive as he could have slept there whenever he was in Jerusalem.

107 See e.g. J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Christianity in the Making 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 636–639, 785.

108 A prophecy of destruction or a cleansing. For destruction, see J. D. Crossan, *Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperOne, 1991), pp. 357–359 or E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1993), pp. 254–262. For cleansing, see, e.g., M. P. Casey, "Culture and Historicity. The Cleansing of the Temple", *CBR* 59, pp. 306–332; C. A. Evans, "Jesus and the 'Cave of Robbers': Toward a Jewish Context for the Temple Action", *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993), pp. 93–110.

well. Even if the encounter did not take place in the last week of Jesus' life, it is likely that this played a part in reinforcing the determination of the Pharisees and temple authorities to kill him. Thus, I believe that future research could benefit from considering the *Pericope Adulterae* as a part of the puzzle for reconstructing the events from the end of Jesus' life.