

The Last Stone: A Biblical Contextual Study of the *Pericope Adulterae*

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7:53–8:11) through a combined textual-historical and theological-exegetical approach. Rather than attempting to resolve the longstanding debate concerning the passage's original place in the Gospel tradition, the study investigates how the pericope has been transmitted, received, and interpreted within Christian tradition. After surveying major manuscript witnesses and patristic references, the article offers a narrative and theological reading of the passage in its canonical Johannine location. Particular attention is given to the themes of judgment, mercy, repentance, and moral responsibility. The analysis argues that the narrative redirects attention from the legal status of the accused woman to the moral condition of her accusers, thereby framing divine justice in relation to self-examination and repentance. The narrative also highlights the role of a marginalized figure who becomes the recipient of divine mercy and transformation. The study concludes that the *Pericope Adulterae* functions as an important locus theologicus for reflecting on the relationship between justice and mercy in Christian thought and ecclesial practice, offering a paradigm of ethical discernment that retains profound resonance within both historical and contemporary theological discourse.

Keywords: *Pericope Adulterae*, Women, Adultery, Torah, Repentance, Forgiveness

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Introduction

In the Gospel of John (7:53–8:11), the encounter between Jesus Christ and the accusers of the woman caught in adultery (*Pericope Adulterae*) is narrated as taking place during the Feast of Tabernacles. The Lord neither judged nor condemned her. Rather, writing twice with His finger on the ground (vv. 6,8), He pronounced a striking and unsettling statement: “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (*Jn* 8:7b). Although this episode is among the most widely known passages in the Gospel tradition, it is absent from several early Greek manuscripts¹ and from certain patristic commentaries. Nevertheless, in critical editions of the *New Testament*, out of respect for its antiquity and long-standing reception, the passage has been retained in the Johannine text at the traditional location². However, it is typically enclosed in square brackets³. A plausible explanation for this phenomenon is that “the absence of the account of the woman caught in adultery may simply reflect a manuscript tradition that ultimately (may) trace back to those original copies from which the pericope was absent.”⁴

Two fourth-century witnesses allude to an episode concerning a sinful woman forgiven by Jesus Christ, whom the majority of exegetes identify with the woman caught in adultery. She was brought into the Temple and set before the Savior by the scribes and Pharisees to be judged and subsequently stoned. The first of these appears in a Syriac work (later translated into Latin as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* 7.2.23), dating from the late third to early fourth century (ca. 300–330 CE)⁵, which refers the *muliere adultera* in a section instructing bishops on how to deal with sinners: “For you do not obey our Savior and our God, to do as even He did with her who had sinned, whom the elders placed before Him, and leaving the judgement in His hands, and departed. But He, the

¹ Cf. Pr. Sabin VERZAN, “Importanța manuscriselor pe papirus pentru studiul Evangheliei după Ioan,” *Mitropolia Olteniei* 7-8 (1960), 447.

² Regarding the passage as a later addition to the Gospel of John, see Yan MA, “A Text-Critical Analysis of John 7:53–8:11 with a Focus on Its Stylistic Discontinuity,” *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 55 (2024): 163–196.

³ See: *The Pericope on the Adulteress in Contemporary Research*, LNTS 551, eds. David Alan BLACK and Jacob N. CERONE (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

⁴ J. K. ELLIOTT, “The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus. By Chris Keith, pp. xvi + 320. (New Testament Tools and Studies, 38.) Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009. ISBN 9004173941. €114,” *JTS* 61 (2010), 295.

⁵ Cf. R. Hugh CONNOLLY, *Introduction to Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), xviii.

searcher of hearts, asked her and said to her: ‘Have the elders condemned you, my daughter?’ She says to him: ‘Nay, Lord’. And He said unto her: ‘Go, neither do I condemn you.’⁶ This constitutes the earliest known reference to the pericope⁷. The second reference appears in the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.17), who reports that Papias of Hierapolis (ca. 135 CE) mentioned an episode involving a woman accused of “many sins” who was forgiven by Jesus, which was found in the so-called Gospel according to the Hebrews. However, no extant copy of that text contains the pericope or anything similar⁸. Referring to this episode—which may correspond to the present pericope—the bishop seeks to encourage indulgence on the part of Christian community leaders toward sinners: “The same writer [...] has expounded another story about a woman who was accused of many sins, which the Gospel according to the Hebrews contains.”⁹

Apart from the important testimony of Didymus the Blind, explicit references to the pericope are largely absent from extant Greek patristic literature until the twelfth century, namely Euthymius Zigabenus¹⁰. Therefore, in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (223.6–13), Didymus says: “We find, therefore, in certain gospels... A woman, it says, was condemned by the Jews for a sin and was being sent to be stoned in the place where that was customary to happen. The saviour, it says, when he saw her and observed that they were ready to stone her, said to those who were about to cast stones, ‘He who has not sinned, let him take a stone and cast it. If anyone is conscious in himself not to have sinned, let him take up a stone and smite her.’ And no one dared. Since they knew in themselves and perceived that they themselves were guilty

⁶ Arthur VOEBUS, *Introduction to The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac I: Chapter I–X*, CSCO 402 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1979), 89.

⁷ The *Apostolic Constitutions* (II), a fourth-century Christian work that draws extensively on the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Didache of the Apostles*, likewise includes a similar reference to the episode of the sinful woman. Both texts, which preserve valuable information concerning the organization and life of Christian communities of that period, as well as Christian doctrine and ecclesiastical discipline, cite the passage with authority, even though they do not clearly specify the source from which it was read or heard – Dieter LUHRMANN, “Die Geschichte von einer Sünderin und andere apokryphe Jesusüberlieferungen bei Dydimus von Alexandrien,” *Novum Testamentum* 37 (1990): 310-311.

⁸ Cf. A. F. J. KLJN, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition*, *Vigilae Christianae Supplements* 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1992): 117-119.

⁹ EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *The Ecclesiastical History*, with an English Translation by Kirshopp Lake (London: William Heinemann, 1926), 299.

¹⁰ See: *Commentarius in Quattuor Evangelia: Expositio in Joannem*, PG 129:1281-1502.

in some things, they did not dare to strike her”¹¹. On the other hand, in the Western tradition, the situation is somewhat different. Most early translations, including the Vulgate, include the pericope, and Saints Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome affirm its authenticity and comment on it. Thanks to their commentaries, a *terminus ad quem* can be established at the beginning of 380 CE¹². Attempting to account for the absence of the pericope in some manuscripts, Augustine explains that it was removed by certain less faithful individuals, or even by some opponents of the orthodox faith, because they feared it might give wives an excuse to sin, expecting to be forgiven as the woman in the *Pericope Adulterae* was. Moreover, the *Syriac Chronicle 8.7*, attributed to Zacharias the Rhetor, bishop of Mytilene (ca. 569 CE), contains a remark concerning the episode of the sinful woman, which confirms a Johannine placement and the possible omission in some manuscripts: “Now there was inserted in the Gospel of the holy Moro the bishop, in the eightyninth canon, a chapter which is related only by John in his Gospel, and is not found in other manuscripts.”¹³ Alongside the commentaries of the Western Fathers, this testimony confirms that the only explicit placement of the pericope until the tenth century CE is *Jn 7:53–8:11*, and also that numerous Christians from the fourth to sixth centuries were familiar with its text, even though some manuscripts included it and others did not¹⁴.

Another issue raised by the pericope concerns its sometimes-fluctuating placement, which is unique in *New Testament* literature, even though the evidence suggests that it first entered the canonical tradition in the Gospel according to John, at its “resting place” (*sie ihre Ruhestätte*)¹⁵, that is, at the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8—a location unanimously confirmed by its extrabiblical citations. Modern scholarship has identified at least twelve different manuscript locations of the passage within the canonical Gospels¹⁶. It

¹¹ Bart D. EHRMAN, *Didymus the Blind and the Text of the Gospels*, SBLNTGF 1 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 145. See also, *Studies in the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, NTTS 33 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 199.

¹² Chris KEITH, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John and the Literacy of Jesus*, NTTND 38, eds. Barth D. Ehrman and Eldon J. Epp (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009): 204-205.

¹³ See: ZACHARIAS RHETOR, *Syriac Chronicle*, trans by F.J. Hamilton and E.W. Brooks (London: Methuen & Co., 1899).

¹⁴ Chris KEITH, *The Pericope Adulterae...*, 133.

¹⁵ Theo K. HECKEL, *Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium*, WUNT 120 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 136.

¹⁶ See my study here: Mihai CIUREA, “The Biblical Text of the Manuscript: General Overview,” *Studies on the Greek Tetraevangelion from the Museum of Oltenia in Craiova (12th Century)*, bilingual edition, trans. by Alina Reșceanu (Craiova: Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, 2020): 90-95.

appears that many of the later alternative placements are due to the influence of lectionary instructions, which moved it to different locations for liturgical reasons¹⁷.

The textual status of the *Pericope Adulterae* remains one of the most debated issues in New Testament scholarship. While questions concerning its authenticity and original location continue to attract scholarly attention¹⁸, the present study does not seek to resolve these issues definitively. Instead, it examines how the passage functions within the Christian tradition while acknowledging the complexity of its textual transmission and the ongoing textual-critical debate. Methodologically, the study proceeds in three stages. First, it surveys significant manuscript and patristic evidence in order to outline the history of the pericope's transmission and reception. These historical observations provide the contextual framework for the analysis rather than constituting the primary object of investigation. Second, it offers a narrative analysis of the text in its canonical Johannine location (*Jn* 7:53–8:11), employing literary and theological exegesis with particular attention to characterization, dialogue, narrative tension, and the interaction between Jesus, the accusers, and the woman accused of adultery. Third, it explores the theological significance of the passage, focusing on the themes of judgment, mercy, repentance, and moral responsibility. By intentionally distinguishing between questions of textual history and theological interpretation, this interdisciplinary approach allows the *Pericope Adulterae* to be examined not primarily as a textual problem to be solved¹⁹, but as a passage whose reception and theological significance warrant careful consideration within the broader Christian tradition. On this basis, the study argues that the pericope continues to function as a *locus theologicus* for ecclesial discernment. The originality of this study lies in its integration of textual reception history with a narrative-theological reading focused on the relationship between judgment, mercy, and moral accountability.

¹⁷ Of all these factors, the most significant was its exclusion from the portion of text read at the Feast of Pentecost in the standard use of the Greek lectionaries – Cf. T. van LOPIK, "Once Again: Floating Words, Their Significance for Textual Criticism," *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 286–291.

¹⁸ See Tommy WASSERMAN, Jennifer KNUST, "The Pericope of the Adulteress (John 7:53–8:11): A New Chapter in Its Textual Transmission," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 85 (2020): 22–55.

¹⁹ The diversity of methodologies employed in scholarship on the *Pericope Adulterae* (textual criticism, literary criticism, reception history, social-scientific approaches, and theological interpretation) has contributed to divergent conclusions – See Chris KEITH, "Recent and Previous Research on the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7.53–8.11)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 6.3 (2008): 377–404.

“You shall not commit adultery!”

This is not the first instance in the Gospels where Jesus is confronted with a question regarding “adultery” (cf. *Mt* 5:27–32; 19:7–9). In this particular context, however, the discussion no longer takes place on an abstract level. A new element complicates the debate—one that we may readily imagine as highly tense: a woman caught in the very act of adultery. She is brought before Jesus as a “test case” of fidelity to the Mosaic Law, which prescribed the death of both protagonists (*i.e.*, the man and the woman) involved in any form of adultery (cf. *Lv* 20:10–16). Even though she faces death, the adulterous woman is nothing more than a pretext in the ongoing dispute between the Lord and His adversaries, largely deprived of agency. She is abruptly thrust into the center of the public square by her accusers and, unlike other women in the *New Testament*, shows no initiative in repenting before the Lord²⁰.

Every detail of the scene suggests a severe confrontation. Jesus is in the Temple of Jerusalem, the spiritual center of Judaism. Seated in the posture of a Rabbi, He teaches “all the people” (*Jn* 8:2). The openness of the setting and the fervor of the crowd testify to the power and authority (*exousia*) of His word, which proves superior to the teaching of the Pharisees and the Scribes (cf. *Mt* 7:29), thereby exasperating them, as was often the case. The discovery of the sinful woman fits perfectly into their diabolical plan to discredit the Teacher from Nazareth (cf. *Mk* 10:17) before those who were captivated by His words and, ultimately, to bring about His downfall. The arrival of the group abruptly interrupts Jesus’ teaching in the midst of the crowd. The situation appears favorable to the accusers and inescapable for Jesus (cf. *Jn* 20:16): if Jesus absolves the woman, He violates the Torah and may be accused accordingly; if He confirms her condemnation, His proverbial mercy and love may be called into question. The dramatic tension assumes a conflict between Jesus and His opponents concerning the interpretation of the Law: within the logic of the narrative, Jesus is portrayed as resisting an interpretation of the Law that would reduce justice to the mere execution of punishment. The evangelist presents the accusers as seeking to test Jesus and challenge His authority. Their confidence is all the greater because they deliberately present the legal prescription in its archaic form—death by stoning (cf. *Dt* 17:5), a severe form of capital punishment: “They said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

²⁰ Cf. D. A. CARSON, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 335–37. See also Craig S. KEENER, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 735–50.

Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. What then do You say?" (Jn 8:4–5). The legal background of the episode is more complex than the narrative itself suggests²¹. Although the Mosaic Law prescribes severe penalties for adultery (*Lv* 20:10; *Dt* 22:22), scholars continue to debate the practical implementation of such penalties in first-century Judea. Likewise, the extent of Jewish judicial authority under Roman administration remains disputed. For this reason, the reference to stoning should be understood not only as a legal question but also as a narrative device that intensifies the confrontation between Jesus and His accusers²².

“He stooped down and wrote with His finger on the ground!”

The woman who is triumphantly brought before the Savior finds herself in an utterly unfortunate position, having been caught in *flagrante delicto*. She is, in effect, already condemned, and Jesus is consulted merely for a formal opinion: “But what do You say?” (Jn 8:5c). The accusers seek to achieve two objectives simultaneously. The woman herself matters little to them; yet if through her they might succeed in having Jesus stoned, the outcome would be ideal²³. The Lord, however, initially responds with an unexpected gesture: “Jesus stooped down and wrote with His finger on the ground” (Jn 8:6b).

This is the only instance in the New Testament in which Jesus Christ—who proclaimed the Word predominantly through oral teaching—is said to write something. This enigmatic sign has, unsurprisingly, stirred the imagination of many. Patristic, medieval, and modern commentators have proposed different symbolic readings of the gesture²⁴, yet none can be demonstrated directly from

²¹ J. DERRETT, M. DUNCAN, “Law in the New Testament: The Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery,” *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963–64): 1–26.

²² N. T. WRIGHT, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 206–41.

²³ As previously noted, acts of sacrilege among the Jews were punished by stoning. Jesus Himself refers to this particular form of death prescribed by the Mosaic Law when He speaks, both historically and prophetically, of the prophets who were stoned in Jerusalem (cf. *Mt* 23:37; *Jn* 10:32). Crucifixion, by contrast, was a form of execution specific to the Roman Empire.

²⁴ Numerous hypotheses have been proposed regarding what Jesus might have written on the ground: the sins of the accusers, the ineffable Name of God (*i.e.*, the Tetragrammaton YHWH), the Decalogue or part of it, and so forth. Others suggest that Christ was doing nothing more than pointing with His finger toward the center of the earth, thus indicating *Sheol*, the place where, according to Jewish tradition, souls descend after death. Nevertheless, the text itself does not specify what Jesus wrote.

the text itself. Consequently, all subsequent interpretations remain conjectural and should be regarded as theological or symbolic readings rather than demonstrable historical conclusions.

It is often assumed that the silences of the Gospel narratives are meaningful and suggestive. Accordingly, the primary concern should not be what the Lord writes. The sacred author does not elaborate on this detail, nor do the Pharisees and Scribes, nor the woman herself. The meaning of this writing lies entirely in the very act of writing (performed twice; cf. *Jn* 8:6, 8). From this singular attitude indeed radiate multiple layers of significance. In its most common interpretation, the act carries a ritual implication, akin to the custom of washing one's hands as a sign of exoneration, withdrawal, or rejection of the judgment underway (cf. *Mt* 27:24). In this regard, reference has sometimes been made to an anticipation of the trial of Christ the Savior, to His silence before Pontius Pilate, and to His acceptance of the Cross²⁵.

On the other hand, writing generally implies the transmission of a message. Jesus' gesture may therefore be understood as a deliberate suspension of the controversy (the solitude of His inner prayer, as He so often did²⁶) rather than an immediate response to the accusation. By stooping down and writing on the ground, He temporarily withdraws from the dispute and refuses to engage on the terms proposed by His opponents. The evangelist offers no explanation of what was written, leaving the significance of the gesture open to interpretation. For this reason, the emphasis should not be placed on the content of the writing itself, but on its narrative function. The action interrupts the escalating confrontation, creates a moment of reflection, and prepares the reader for the decisive response that follows²⁷.

This gesture may be understood as a symbolic act charged with profound theological meaning. By writing on the ground, the Johannine Jesus appears to confer a divine mark upon creation itself. The earth maintains a mysterious and constitutive relationship with the human being: humanity is formed from the dust of the ground and animated by the divine breath, yet through the Fall forfeits immortality and returns to the earth from which it was fashioned. Christ Himself, the incarnate Word, will dwell within the earth before ultimately overcoming death through the Resurrection. Consequently, Jesus' act of tracing words upon the dust should be seen as a gesture with deep symbolic resonance,

²⁵ See: Gilles BECQUET, *Lecture d'évangiles pour les dimanches et fêtes des temps principaux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973): 201-203.

²⁶ Cf. *Mt* 14:23; 26:36-39; *Mk* 1:35; 6:46; *Lk* 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 22:41; *Jn* 17, etc.

²⁷ France QUERE, *Les femmes de l'évangile* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982): 21-22.

one that exceeds the limits of human comprehension. It may be interpreted as an implicit reminder of the fragility and transience of human existence, perpetually overshadowed by the reality of death. Addressed to the Pharisees—whose zeal was directed toward the woman’s destruction—this gesture recalls the precarious condition of humanity, ever vulnerable to dissolution and return to dust²⁸.

“Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone!”

The Pharisees and Scribes pressed their case, confident of success, but Jesus suddenly rose and uttered perhaps the most famous words of His Gospel: “*Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her!* Again, He stooped down and wrote on the ground” (*Jn 8:7b–8*). The statement constitutes a striking reversal of the accusers’ expectations. Despite His gentleness and immeasurable mercy, Jesus now pronounces a firm directive. In the eyes of His enemies, He responds like a strict rabbi, turning the situation against them. He defeats them with their own weapons, unwaveringly reiterating the terms of the Old Covenant. The book of *Deuteronomy* prescribed that the first witnesses should begin the stoning, to be followed by the people. Paradoxically, the narrative reorients the criteria of judgment: virtue replaces testimony; the process becomes interiorized; the judge must first examine himself. For this reason, the Church Fathers would later teach that one must condemn sin but not despise the sinner, emphasizing mercy and repentance.

The passage appears to place particular emphasis on the dangers of hypocrisy and self-righteousness and confronts readers with the universality of human sinfulness, since we are not as righteous as we imagine²⁹. Within the wider context of Jesus’ teaching, moral responsibility extends beyond external actions to include thoughts, intentions, and desires (cf. *Mt 5:27–30*). If we despise the notorious sinner nearby, who nonetheless sheds the sincerest tears of repentance at the Lord’s feet, and consider ourselves superior, we have no right even to compare ourselves with him (cf. *Lk 7:36–50*). Moreover, this woman did not sin alone. Why did her accusers not bring her accomplice,

²⁸ Natalia MANOILESCU DINU, *Iisus Hristos Mântuitorul în lumina Sfintelor Evanghelii* (Bucuresti: Editura Bizantină, 2004), 343.

²⁹ In the Fifth Prayer of the Holy Unction, it is said, moreover, that “all our righteousness is before You as a filthy garment.” – *Molitfelnic* (Bucuresti: Editura Institutului Biblic si de Misiune Ortodoxa, 2019), 159.

for according to the Law, the man caught in flagrante with her was also to be stoned? No word is mentioned of his absence. The absence of the male participant has frequently been noted by commentators and contributes to the asymmetrical character of the accusation. A striking cowardice, often overlooked, which speaks clearly of shared responsibility and equality in the one Body of Christ (cf. *1 Cor* 12:13; *Gal* 3:28; *Col* 3:11).

Following Jesus' challenge, the previously united group of accusers gradually disperses. The episode emphasizes the universality of human sinfulness and the impossibility of claiming absolute moral innocence.³⁰ The stoning, which according to the Law would have been just, is now invested by Christ with another function beyond execution: it must also reflect the holiness of the accuser. This alone is sufficient to interrupt the entire "chain of human weakness." The assembly breaks up and disperses: "And when they heard it, being convicted by their conscience, they went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last; and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst" (*Jn* 8:9). As we have seen, the Lord reverses perspective and reveals, to the guilty, the hierarchy of sin as existential failure rather than a measure of virtue, which is organically linked to agape love (cf. *1 Cor* 13)³¹.

Beginning with the elders and likely ending with the youngest, all depart, having unconsciously shifted from accusers to the accused, struggling with the humiliation of defeat with difficulty³². This sinful woman, whom they had just dragged forcefully before Jesus and humiliated, now, resigned and humble, standing the entire time with bowed head, assumes, by the will of God, the unexpected role of both witness and judge. The text effectively reverses the accusation and places the accusers under scrutiny. The stratagem intended to ensnare Jesus had been so subtly foiled. And the Lord, again concerned with writing (cf. *Jn* 8:8), tempers, through His apparent absence, the shame of their scattering.

³⁰ As suggested by the etymology of the name Michael (Hebrew *Mikha'el* = "Who is like God?"), or as beautifully expressed in the Cherubic Hymn of the Divine Orthodox Liturgy: "None of those bound by passions and carnal pleasures is worthy (*Oudeis axios...*) to come, to draw near, or to serve You, King of Glory; for to serve You is a great and awe-inspiring thing even for the heavenly powers" – *Liturghier* (Bucuresti: Editura Institutului Biblic si de Misiune Ortodoxa, 2012), 160.

³¹ See my recent study: pr. lect. univ. dr. Mihai CIUREA, "Imnul iubirii din 1 Corinteni 13 sau despre dragostea (*agape*) care nu cade niciodată," *Mitropolia Olteniei* 5-8 (2025): 46-63.

³² Some interpreters have suggested that the departure of the elders first may reflect their greater social experience and awareness of the implications of Jesus' response.

It is, however, difficult to determine with certainty what motivated the withdrawal of the Pharisees and Scribes. One possible explanation is that the force of Jesus' response lies not only in the reference to personal sinfulness but also in the practical implication of His command: "*Let him cast the first stone!*" The episode may suggest that the challenge was no longer merely theoretical. Those who had invoked the Law were now confronted with the responsibility of personally carrying out its penalty. In this respect, Jesus transforms a legal discussion into a question of individual moral accountability. Rather than pronouncing judgment Himself, He places the burden of judgment upon the accusers. Another factor that may have contributed to their withdrawal concerns the broader legal context of the period. Although the extent of Jewish authority in capital cases under Roman administration remains debated, several scholars have noted the complexities surrounding the implementation of such penalties. From this perspective, the command to cast the first stone may have exposed tensions between legal prescription and practical execution³³. The text itself does not specify the precise reasons for the accusers' departure, yet it portrays them as unwilling to assume the role that their accusation required.

The episode therefore shifts attention from the guilt of the woman to the responsibility of those who seek to judge her. The accusers gradually withdraw from the scene, leaving the woman alone with Jesus. Their departure functions as an implicit acknowledgment that the attempted accusation has failed, thereby preparing the way for the final exchange between Jesus and the woman. Moreover, their withdrawal gives the appearance—entirely unusual for them—of mercy and forgiveness. Their departure may be interpreted as an implicit renunciation of the punishment they had sought to impose. In this way, the episode prepares the reader for Jesus' final response to the woman. The narrative depicts the accusers gradually withdrawing after Jesus' challenge, leaving the woman alone with Him. Their departure vindicates the woman, which is why the Lord later tells her: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (*Jn* 8:11b).

As for the woman caught in adultery, throughout this entire ordeal, she did not move. Between the tablets of the Law and the stones of stoning, she remained frozen. She remains exposed to the imminent possibility of punishment.

³³ Thus, any attempt by them to carry out such a punishment themselves would have placed them in direct conflict with imperial law and rendered them culpable before the authorities. This is precisely what they would do with Jesus Christ, whom they brought to trial in the praetorium, before the procurator Pontius Pilate (cf. *Mt* 27:2; *Mk* 15:1; *Lk* 23:1; *Jn* 18:28-29; *Acts* 13:28; *1 Tm* 6:13).

And when death seemed imminent, she hears from the Lord a word of forgiveness, coupled with the command not to sin again. When Jesus asks her, “Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?” she replies, “No one, Lord!”. Her response has often been interpreted by Christian commentators as suggestive of openness to Jesus’ authority, although the narrative does not explicitly describe her interior disposition. The exchange prepares the reader for the declaration of forgiveness that follows and juxtaposes human helplessness and divine deliverance (cf. *1 Tm* 2:4). At this point, the episode shifts from confrontation to restoration and concludes with forgiveness and also an exhortation to abandon sin, a combination that many interpreters have associated with themes of repentance and restoration.

Conclusion

The *Pericope Adulterae* (*Jn* 7:53–8:11) occupies a distinctive place within the Christian tradition because of the convergence of two factors: its complex textual history and its enduring theological influence. The manuscript and patristic evidence surveyed in this study demonstrates that, although the passage circulated unevenly in the earliest stages of transmission and was absent from several important witnesses, it was nevertheless widely known and received within diverse Christian communities. Its preservation in the canonical tradition and its extensive reception among later Christian authors attest to its enduring significance for the life of the Church. The narrative itself presents a carefully constructed confrontation in which the legal accusation brought against the woman becomes secondary to the deeper moral and spiritual condition of all those involved. Rather than engaging primarily with the procedural aspects of the case, the evangelist directs attention toward the universal reality of human sinfulness and the necessity of personal accountability before God. Jesus neither denies the seriousness of sin nor dismisses the ethical demands of the Law. Instead, He reorients the discussion from external judgment to self-examination, exposing the inadequacy of a purely punitive approach divorced from awareness of one’s own moral condition. Within this framework, the episode explores a dynamic relationship between justice and mercy. The woman is neither condemned nor declared innocent; she is confronted with the reality of her actions and simultaneously offered the possibility of renewal. Likewise, the accusers are not publicly humiliated or explicitly condemned. They are invited to recognize their own vulnerability to sin and to abandon a form

of judgment that neglects self-scrutiny. The narrative thus portrays compassion not as the suspension of moral truth but as the context in which acknowledgment of truth may open the possibility of moral transformation.

From a theological perspective, the *Pericope Adulterae* may therefore be understood as a significant locus for reflection on repentance, forgiveness, and communal discernment. Its enduring value lies not in providing a solution to every historical or textual question surrounding its transmission, but in its capacity to illuminate a fundamental dimension of the Christian message: the inseparable relationship between divine justice and divine mercy. In this respect, the passage continues to offer an important resource for theological reflection and ecclesial practice, reminding readers that authentic judgment begins with the recognition of one's own need for grace.

At the same time, the episode illustrates how legal, moral, and theological concerns converge within a single narrative framework. By shifting attention from the offense itself to the disposition of those who seek to judge it, the pericope challenges any interpretation of justice that is detached from self-examination and moral responsibility. The passage neither relativizes sin nor abolishes the demands of the Law; rather, it situates both within a broader horizon shaped by repentance, accountability, and the possibility of transformation. For this reason, the *Pericope Adulterae* continues to occupy an important place in contemporary biblical scholarship and theological reflection, serving as a paradigmatic text for exploring the relationship between judgment, mercy, and the restoration of the human person.

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