

To Cast the First Stone: The Transmission of a Gospel Story, by Jennifer Knust and Tommy Wasserman

Princeton University Press. 2019, pp. 464, \$45.00/£35.00
ISBN: 9780691169880

Reviewed by Wessel Bentley

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1167-4858>

University of South Africa

bentlw1@unisa.ac.za

In several Christian traditions, the claim is made that the Bible is inerrant and infallible. Drawing mostly from 1 Timothy 3:16, it is believed that the “inspired” nature of the Bible sets it apart from any other text as God’s absolute revelation to humanity. Although the initial intention pertaining to biblical inerrancy and infallibility referred to the Bible’s teaching (in general), these traditions have extended it to refer to a literal, fundamentalist interpretation. Devoid of this hermeneutic is the recognition of external influences on the formation and transmission of the biblical texts.

This book, using the *Pericope Adulterae* found in John 7:53–8:11, describes the complexity of the transmission of biblical narratives and makes an excellent case against the unquestioned adoption of the Bible as God’s unmediated voice. Knust and Wasserman start off their investigation into the history of this pericope by pointing out that this passage has a long history of controversy and contention in the Christian church. Not known to many adherents to the Christian faith, is the dynamic nature of the church’s acceptance or rejection of certain passages of Scripture. This passage was cautioned against by prominent church leaders, for instance Augustine, who advised against the reading and teaching of this passage as it was believed to give licence to women to be unfaithful to their husbands (p.6). Jesus’ seemingly unreserved absolution of the woman caught in adultery raised questions in the church about the strictness with which God measures faithfulness, the bonds of exclusive marital unions and even in a more general reference, sin. Did this passage imply that religion approaches sin, judgment and means to salvation in measures that God would not adhere to?

If this were the case, then for what reasons would the church decide to include this pericope in the canon of Scripture? The authors then tease out the argument that suggests



Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>

Volume 47 | Number 3 | 2021 | #10109 | 3 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/10109>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)

© The Author(s) 2022



Published by the Church History Society of Southern Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

that this pericope is not evidence of what Bonhoeffer labelled as “cheap grace.” Jesus’ approach was justified on the basis that Jesus was not justifying the woman’s (read “couple’s”) behaviour, but that He objected to the inappropriate application of the law (p.39). The law of God, according to this interpretation, should race towards healing, forgiveness and love—and conversely, should steer away from becoming a punitive tool obsessed with sin, judgment and death. The periscope does not objectify either the woman or her accusers, but demands a form of justice that concerns itself with people and not issues (p.45). The historical viability of these events was further placed under scrutiny by, for instance Origen, who suggested that although the penalty for infidelity in Jewish law was certainly followed by the accusers, the exercise of this judgment would not have been permitted under Roman law (p.59). If Jesus did not intervene, would their plans to stone the woman have been thwarted nonetheless? The pericope, therefore, does not only raise theological questions, but also brings to the fore political and judicial complexities. Why did Jesus then intervene? Was it out of an interpretation of the Jewish law to show grace rather than condemnation, or was Jesus choosing the Roman law over the Jewish law?

To answer this question, the authors point to other parallels that exist between this story and other narratives that circulated at the time. Such parallels indicate that the value of the pericope points to much more than only theological or legal questions. Knust and Wasserman present several stories in other texts that show great similarities in content. One such passage is found in a Proto-Gospel of James. In this rendition, Mary and Joseph are described as being accused of sexual sin. When found to be innocent, the priest declared the following: “If the Lord God has not revealed your sins, neither do I condemn you” (p.64). Was the author of the *Pericope Adulterae* suggesting another line of argument, namely the identity and personhood of Jesus himself? If Mary and Joseph were judged in the same way the accusers judged the woman, would Jesus have been born? With this in mind, this passage challenged not only the Jewish law, but also the early church’s strong penal system. As Jesus’ offered absolution could not be reconciled with the church’s strong-armed response to “sin”, it is no wonder that for periods in the church’s history, this passage was either ignored or was not included in its teaching—or even in the transmission of the gospel narrative.

The church’s ability to choose passages that would entrench its own view and authority smacks of male dominance and the victimisation of women through the ages (p.139). The story showed that Jesus’ morals and ethical framework were less deontologically inclined (as opposed to Jewish law or church canon), but depended more on teleological and virtue frames of reference, underlined by His own fortune of being born out of wedlock.

This passage did not only challenge moral codes in the surrounds of Asia-minor, but found its way to the then far-reaches of the church’s existence. The authors cite an interesting example of how this passage was used in an ancient Egyptian monastery to embed a principle that no brother should ever be expelled from a monastery, irrespective

of their sin (p.205), but that the gospel should make provision for repentance, healing, restoration and growth in community.

Knust and Wasserman then go further by comparing the usage of this passage in the Western and Eastern traditions of the Christian faith. Linked to this is the transmission of the gospel in Greek and theological Latin, and how this impacted the interpretation of its teaching. They come to the conclusion that although the passage created contention in both contexts, its consistent inclusion and usage in both speak volumes of the pericope's value in conveying the message of grace that should be imbedded in the law, rather than contradict it.

The last section of the book then focuses on the liturgical use of this passage in church history. Here, too, we find controversy as we find the deliberate omission of this passage from lectionaries (p.293). The authors then make a tremendous contribution in comparing lectionaries and notes in texts on why this passage should or should not be presented in the context of worship.

As a whole, the book is a thorough working through ancient manuscripts and clearly shows that although considered a sacred text, the Bible is by and large a human product, shaped by history, culture, politics, social understandings of what it means to be human, ethics and ecclesiastical traditions, and emphasis in theology and liturgy (p. 308). The number and quality of footnotes are testimony enough that this book is a serious attempt at uncovering not only the meaning of the text itself, but the reasons for its inclusion in the canon of Scripture. This will definitely become recommended reading to my students who seek clarity on the impact of human tradition, history and culture in the shaping of what we receive as Holy Scripture.