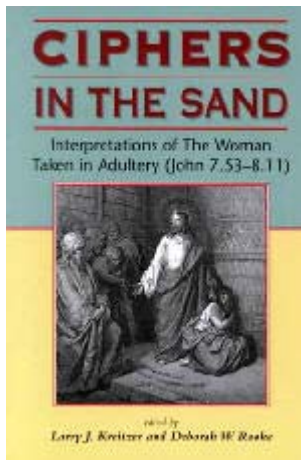


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Kreitzer, Larry Joseph and Deborah W. Rooke, eds.

Ciphers in the Sand: Interpretations of the Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7.53-8.11)

The Biblical Seminar 74

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Ciphers in the Sand is a collection of essays by a group of cross-disciplinary scholars, of whom half hail from Regents Park College, Oxford. Among the disciplines represented are biblical studies, systematic and pastoral theology, and historical and literary studies. Consequently, the interpretations of this pericope vary widely. The main attempt of this book is to provide a series of essays that explore the “effective history” of the pericope, namely, how it has been received through history. While the title of the book is intended to reference Jesus’ finger drawing, in a subjective manner it also illuminates the contents of the book; whereas some of the articles clearly illuminate the chosen pericope, others encode it.

The first three essays focus on ancient reception. Deborah W. Rooke examines the concept of adultery as evidenced in the Old and New Testaments. J. Martin C. Scott provides an overview of the textual reception of the pericope, its location, inclusion, exclusion, and final resting place within the Gospel tradition. Thomas O’Loughlin provides a sampling of the Western fathers’ use of this text in their writings. The middle two essays by Mark Atherton and Larry J. Kreitzer analyze the literary reception of this

scandalous pericope in various historical writings from Bede to Hawthorne. The collection closes with two essays demonstrating the reception of the *pericope adulterae* in feminist interpretation. Jayne Scott examines the pattern of violence by males toward females throughout history, while Elizabeth E. Green discusses some feminist readings of this controversial story.

Rooke's contribution, "Wayward Women and Broken Promises: Marriage, Adultery and Mercy in Old and New Testaments," provides an appropriate foundation for interpreting this Jewish pericope. Her examination of the Old Testament ideas of marriage and adultery find their root in a patriarchal desire to "control female sexuality" (23). The penalty of death, intended to "purge the evil from Israel," was assigned in cases of adultery and other crimes of rebellion toward societal authority (27). Rooke notes that the absence of recorded cases may lead to an understanding of the Old Testament regulations as "ideal" laws (31). The metaphors of marriage and adultery are frequent institutions in the prophetic literature, where adultery is paired with apostasy to symbolize a "broken marriage" (42). Having provided a first-century Jewish context for adultery, Rooke examines the pericope for possible interpretations. First and foremost, Rooke notes that the law for stoning a lone female applies to nonvirgin brides, not the case here, so the pericope has an absent party: the man involved. Indeed, given the absence of the third party, Rooke presents alternate circumstances for the story, namely, that the woman was innocent and was being convicted on hearsay. The ambiguity of the case and situation are not lost to Jesus, who applies justice and mercy in his teaching.

Scott's "On the Trail of a Good Story: John 7.53–8.11 in the Gospel Tradition" is an examination of the textual reception of this pericope. After briefly summarizing Ulrich Becker's 1963 work on the manuscript evidence for this story, Scott focuses on reading the text in its current location. His reading centers on word choice (the Mount of Olives versus the mount called Olives), intratextual allusions (the woman at the well, the Prologue), and intertextual allusions (Sophia, Susannah). Scott categorizes the various projections for Jesus' "ciphering" before elucidating intertextual inferences for digital writing in the Jewish tradition as well as for the physical movements made by Jesus

(standing and sitting twice). Following his close reading of the story within its literary environment, Scott examines reasons to include or exclude the story from the canonical corpus. The rationale behind either decision appears to be based in a male hierarchical power structure seeking to control the sexuality of Christian wives. Scott argues that now is the time for this woman's story to emerge from its chains and proclaim her innocence in the face of unjust accusations.

O'Loughlin's examination of the effective history of the text provides insight into the reception of this story by the Latin fathers: Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Cassiodorus. O'Loughlin does not limit himself to these four by choice but because they are the only Western fathers to discuss the pericope in their extant writings. Although each writer presents this passage within a distinct context, they draw on common interpretations: they condemn the Jewish leaders for attempting to trap Jesus and encourage Jesus' example of mercy and forgiveness to their audience (100). O'Loughlin concludes that one reason the pericope is not addressed more frequently is that it challenges a husband's control of his wife's sexual behavior and in so doing the structures of society.

As the book moves into literary and feminist readings, this pericope finds itself moved offstage while center stage is occupied by other issues. Atherton's segment, "A Place for Mercy: Some Allegorical Readings of 'The Woman Taken in Adultery' from the Early Middle Ages," quotes from the writings of Bede, the *Heliand*, and the Exeter Book to illustrate echoes of the pericope. Larry J. Kreitzer utilizes this adulterous pericope to understand another story of adultery in " 'Revealing the Affairs of the Heart': Sin, Accusation and Confession in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*." This single discussion encompasses one-fourth of the book. Kreitzer employs his expertise in drawing New Testament images from fiction and film to look at both the text and film renderings of this nineteenth-century classic. In a segment subtitled "Hawthorne's Use of Biblical Imagery," Kreitzer illuminates the various textual allusions and inferences employed by the author of *The Scarlet Letter*. Here Kreitzer notes that the pericope under investigation is never mentioned in the text he is investigating. Kreitzer does draw out

several parallels between the two stories, including the condemnation of the female party alone. However, Kreitzer's contribution remains a study of a modern text that gives a token nod to the *pericope adulterae*.

Jayne Scott's "The One That Got Away" is a look at the violence perpetrated on women in two parts. She provides, first, a brief history of the suffering by women in "abusive value systems" while men have escaped punishment by exiting through the back door and, second, an examination of masculine violence as a means of control and dominance (215). Scott does illuminate the pericope through two brief notes. First, the woman in between Jesus and the Pharisees represents the multitude of women who have no voice in the power systems that condemn them. Second, Jesus' behavior is significantly different from that of any other first-century Jewish male, thus prompting the pericope's inclusion in the canon.

In the final article, "Making Her Case and Reading It Too: Feminist Readings of the Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery," Elizabeth E. Green examines current feminist interpretations of the pericope. She categorizes these strategies of interpretation in terms of historical reconstruction, women's experience, literary paradigm, and literary unit. Her discussion of historical reconstruction highlights various efforts to this task: focusing on women in the stories, emphasizing women in the life of Jesus, finding ways in which women contributed to the transmission of these stories. Her discussion of these multivariant interpretations leads to an understanding of the difficulty of applying such diverse methods to a single text. Themes such as "moral religious authorities" instead of patriarchal structures condemning the woman and the woman's resonance with other accused adulterers, even with Mary, are brought to the forefront.

The effect of this compilation is to introduce the student of this pericope to a wide variety of cross-disciplinary interpretations. However, the reader is also struck by the repetition within the articles. Major interpretive comments are frequently repeated by various writers, ancient opinions cited in unison, and modern interpretive approaches, such as the woman's innocence, creep into multiple discussions. The inclusion of

bibliographies for each chapter means that several works appear on multiple lists. The reader taking a holistic approach to the text will find such redundancy distracting.

Picking up a book with the subtitle “Interpretations of the Woman Taken in Adultery,” the reader anticipates that the pericope will be the main focus of each article. However, as the interpretive schemes move toward literary and feminist methods, the pericope becomes less a subject and more an aside. Although Green moves the book back to the pericope, the articles by Atherton, Kreitzer, and Scott increasingly force the reader to rationalize their presence in this text. Indeed, it may be that these articles were pericopes in search of a publication. This reader’s reaction to the latter half of the book should be expressed in the words of Kreitzer (and this reader), where he notes in his discussion of one particular film version, “Why has the reaction been so negative? Much of it has to do with the film’s [articles’] perceived infidelity to Hawthorne’s [Christianity’s] classic tale and its anachronistic pandering to modern concerns” (196).

What does *Ciphers in the Sand* contribute to scholarship on this pericope? Recent and ancient commentators’ views on the pericope give a historical perspective to its use within church history. The various discussions do bring together in one place many of the interpretive approaches to this story. The textual travels of the story are well documented, and historical perspective is provided for its colorful journey. In addition, several speculations are given to describe its difficulty in being accepted. Finally, the various approaches represent different scholarly circles so that the numerous bibliographies provide a fairly complete reference for the major discussions on this pericope.