

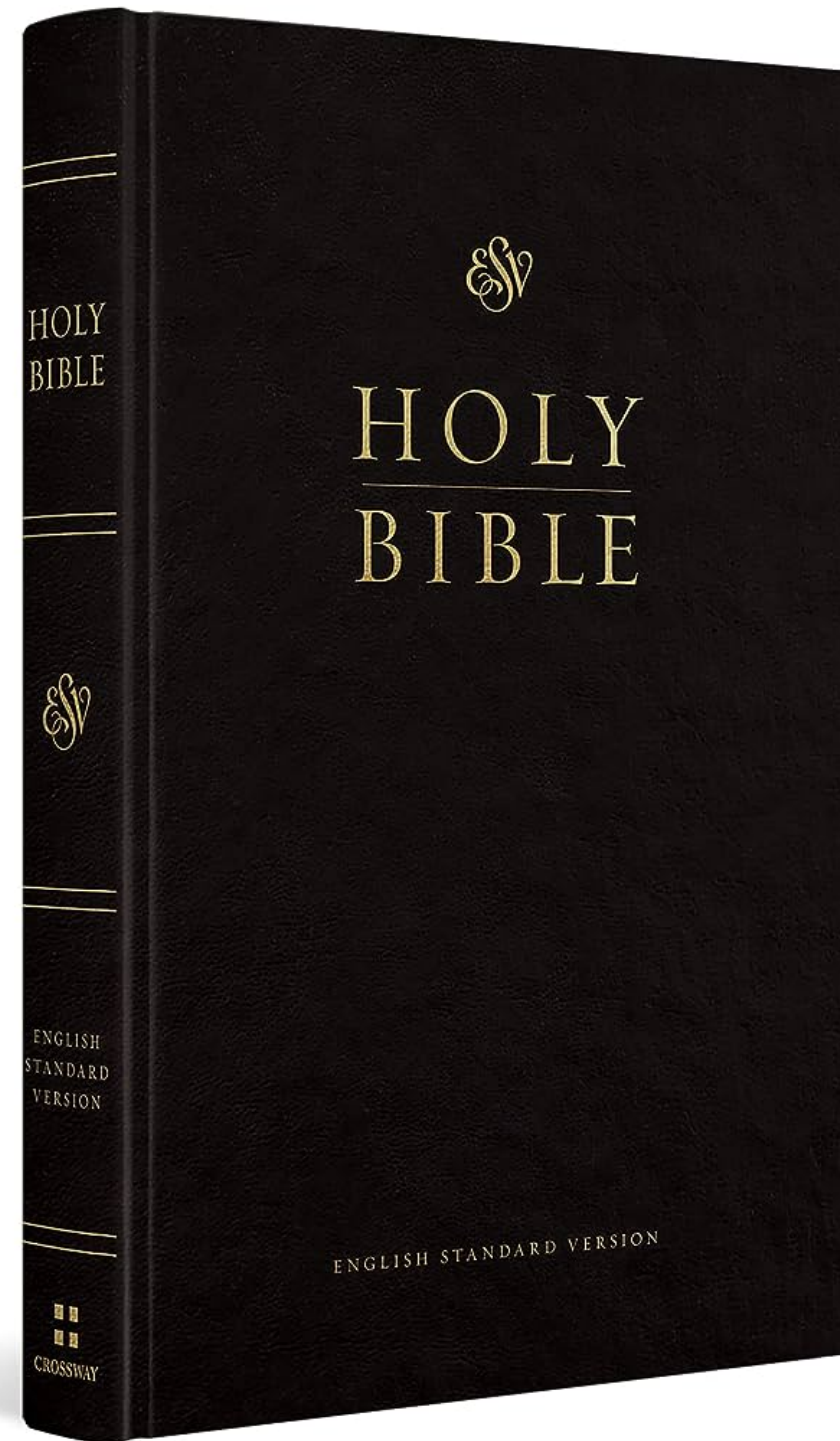
The Woman Caught in Adultery

Introduction & Text-Critical Issues



Rembrandt, "Christ and the Adulteress" (1644), oil on oak wood

John 7:52–53, English Standard Version (ESV)



52 They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.”

[The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11.]

The Woman Caught in Adultery

53 [[They went each to his own house, ...

Why Address This?

1. To increase our confidence that the Bible is accurate and trustworthy.
2. To have confidence in modern Bible translations such as the English Standard Version.
3. To be equipped to answer those who try to use these issues to discredit the Bible.
4. To move past a fragile view of the Bible to a mature view of the Bible.
5. To demonstrate the Christian commitment to honesty and truth.

You will always fear what you don't understand.

This Note is Not Unique to the ESV

[The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11.]

1. A note is included in most modern *conservative* Bible translations.
 - RSV: “The most ancient authorities omit 7.53–8.11; other authorities add the passage here or after 7.36 or after 21.25 or after Luke 21.38, with variations of text.”
 - The story of the adulteress woman is bracketed off by the NASB, LEB, NET, etc.
2. A note is included in some medieval Greek Bibles which omit the story altogether.
 - They note that “the [chapter] concerning the adulteress” is not found in most manuscripts, nor mentioned by the divine fathers John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Theodore of Mopsuestia and the rest. (Text & Canon Institute, Tommy Wasserman)

Let's start at the beginning...
How did we get John's Gospel
and the rest of the New
Testament?

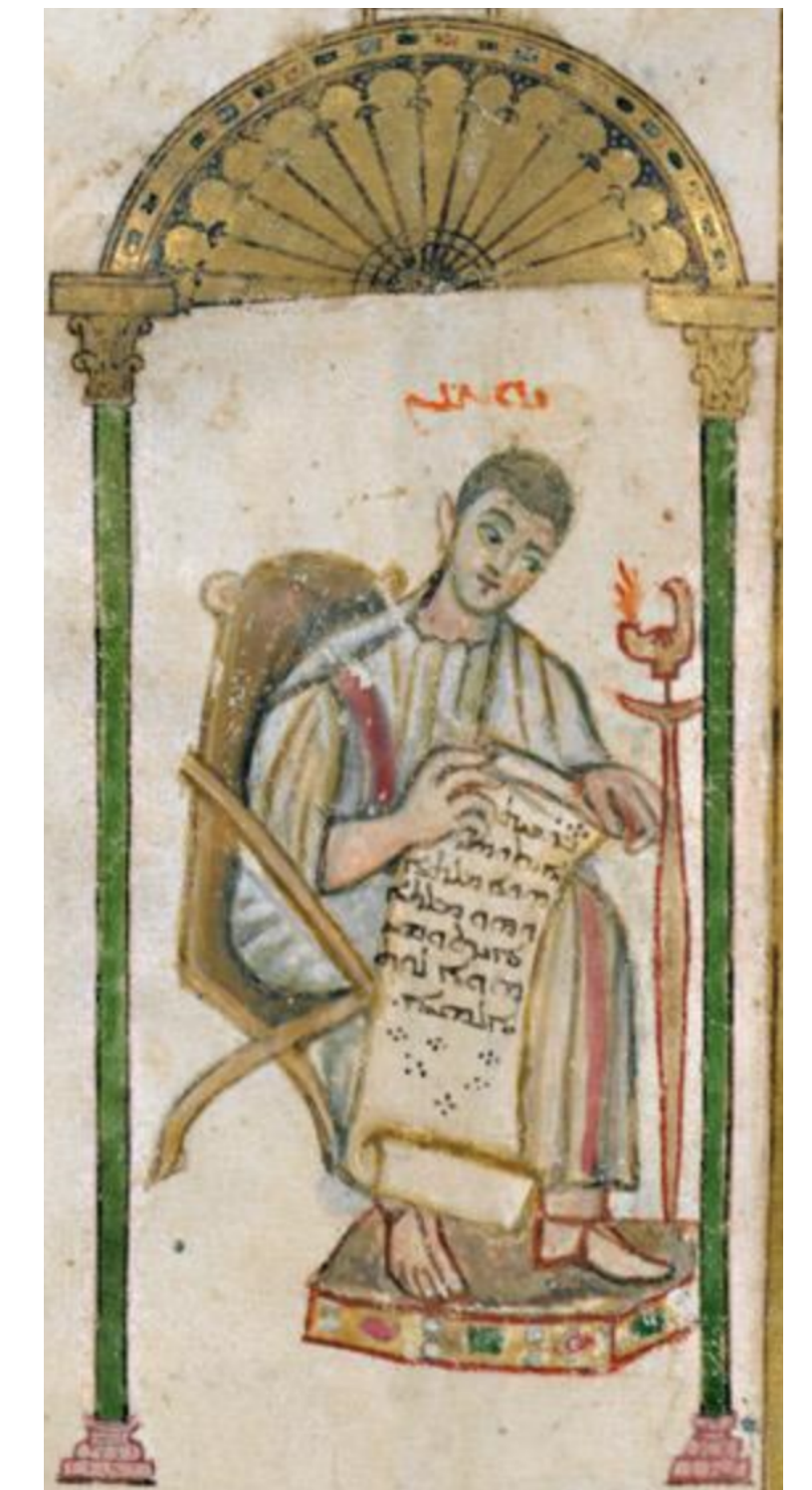


1. The books of the New Testament were written in the Greek language over a period of around 60 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

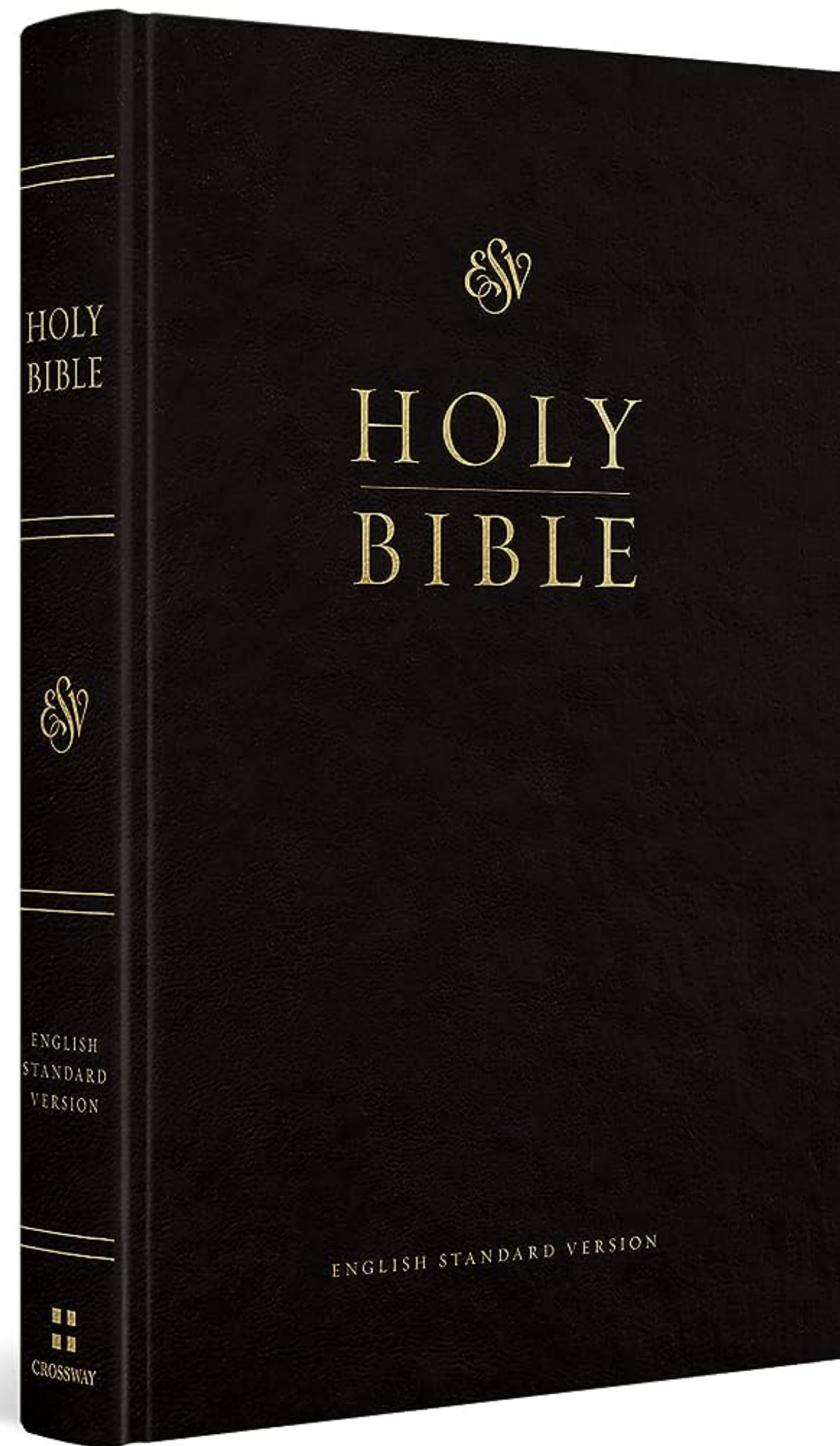
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|-------|--|
| 40–45 | James writes his letter |
| 48 | Paul writes his letter to the Galatians |
| 49–51 | Paul writes 1 & 2 Thessalonians from Corinth |
| 53–55 | Mark writes his Gospel, Matthew likely follows |
| 53–55 | Paul writes 1 Corinthians from Ephesus |
| 55–56 | Paul writes 2 Corinthians from Macedonia |
| 57 | Paul writes Romans from Corinth |
| 60–70 | Letter to the Hebrews is written |
| 62–63 | Peter writes his first letter from Rome |
| 62 | Paul writes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon while under house |
| 62 | Luke writes Luke and Acts |

| | |
|-------|---|
| 62–64 | Paul writes 1 Timothy from Macedonia and Titus from Nicopolis |
| 64–67 | Peter writes his second letter |
| 64–67 | Jude writes his letter |
| 64–67 | Paul writes 2 Timothy |
| 85–95 | John writes 1–3 John , probably in Ephesus |
| 89–95 | John writes his Gospel , probably in Ephesus |
| 95–96 | John writes Revelation while exiled on Patmos |

Timeline adapted from the ESV Study Bible. All dates are approximate.



A Syriac Christian rendition of St. John the Evangelist, from the Rabbula Gospels.



“All Scripture is breathed out by God [inspired] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

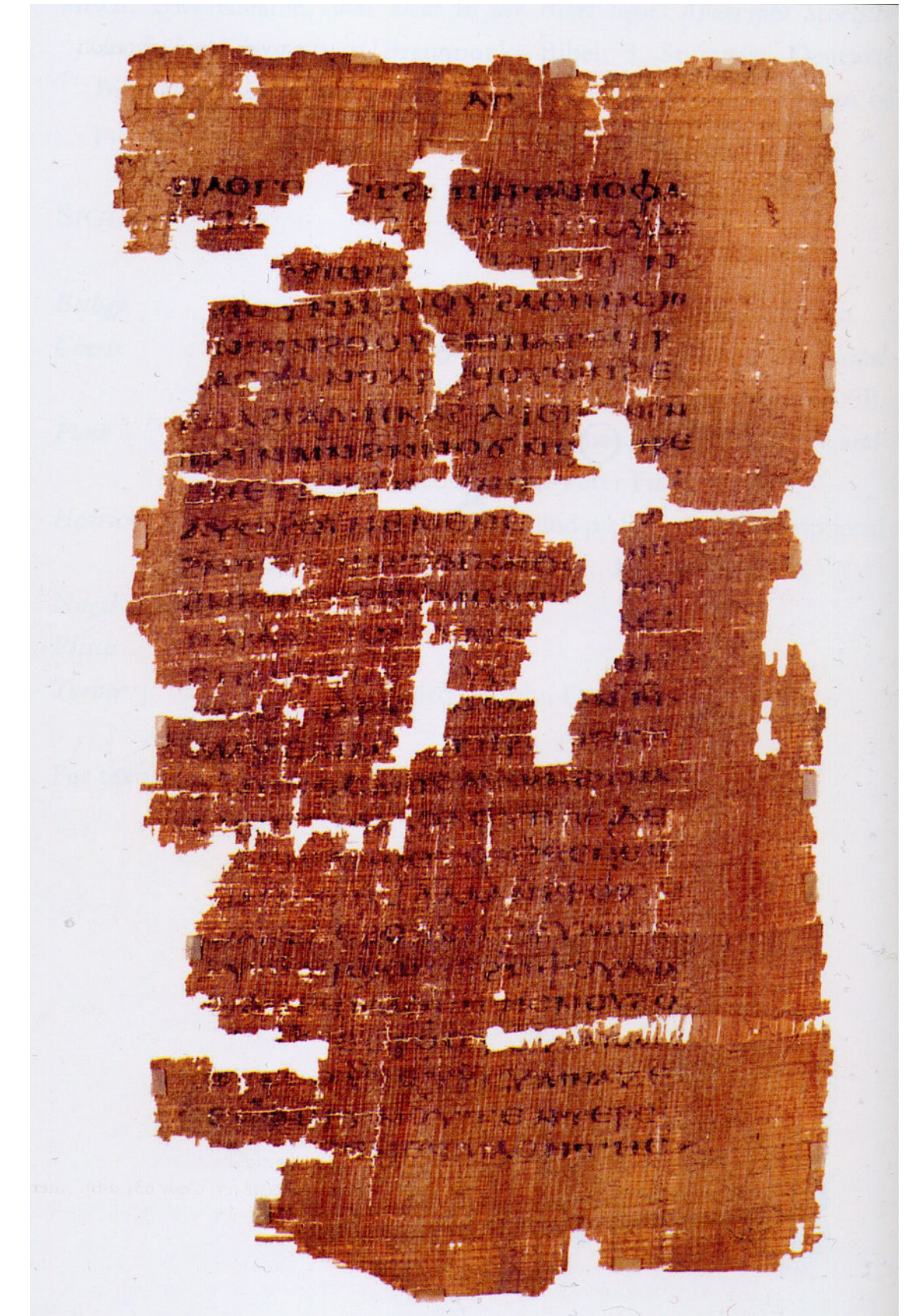
2 Timothy 3:16–17

2. Other books were written during this time, but the church went through a careful process to *recognize* which books should be included with the Old Testament as divinely-inspired Scripture.

“knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of **Scripture** comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but **men spoke from God** as they were **carried along by the Holy Spirit**. . . . our beloved brother **Paul** also wrote to you according to **the wisdom given him**, as he does in **all his letters** when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other **Scriptures**.”

2 Peter 1:20–22; 3:15–17

- Approximately 22 of the 27 NT books—including the Gospel of John—were being used as Scripture by the middle of the 2nd century (remarkably early!).
- A few books (mostly the smaller books like 2 Peter, Jude, James, and 2–3 John) were disputed for a time, which reflects the great care that the church took in recognizing what constitutes Scripture.
- *Some books like the so-called Gospel of Peter and Gospel of Judas were rejected as false.*
- *Other books like the Gospel of Hebrews were believed to have some valuable content, but were also problematic or heretical at points, and were ultimately rejected as Holy Scripture.*



fragment of the Gospel of Judas

3. The books of the New Testament were copied many times by careful and skilled scribes, but we no longer have the original copies of any book.

- In ancient times, they wrote on **papyrus** [pronounced “puh-pai-ruhs”], a material that is similar to thick paper.
- The original papyrus of all the biblical books has been lost. It probably deteriorated within the first century due to frequent copying.



Papyrus (above) and the papyrus plant (right)



- What we have are around 5,800 manuscript copies.
- These manuscripts vary in length, date, quality, and content.



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Manuscript Differences

- There are many variants (differences) in the manuscripts that we have. However...
- “The best estimates are that at least **99.8% of textual variants affect *nothing***. Most are spelling variants (e.g., there’s different ways to spell Mary or John). **No essential doctrine is jeopardized by any of these variants.** That is extremely comforting. It’s very important to know that” (Daniel Wallace).
- *Textual criticism* is the work of comparing manuscripts to determine the original.

*“That is extremely comforting.
It’s very important to know that.”*

99.8%

of manuscript differences affect *nothing*
(e.g., they are spelling differences)

0%

of manuscript differences affect
any major Christian doctrine

Only 2 Passages in Question Longer Than 2 Verses

- Woman caught in adultery

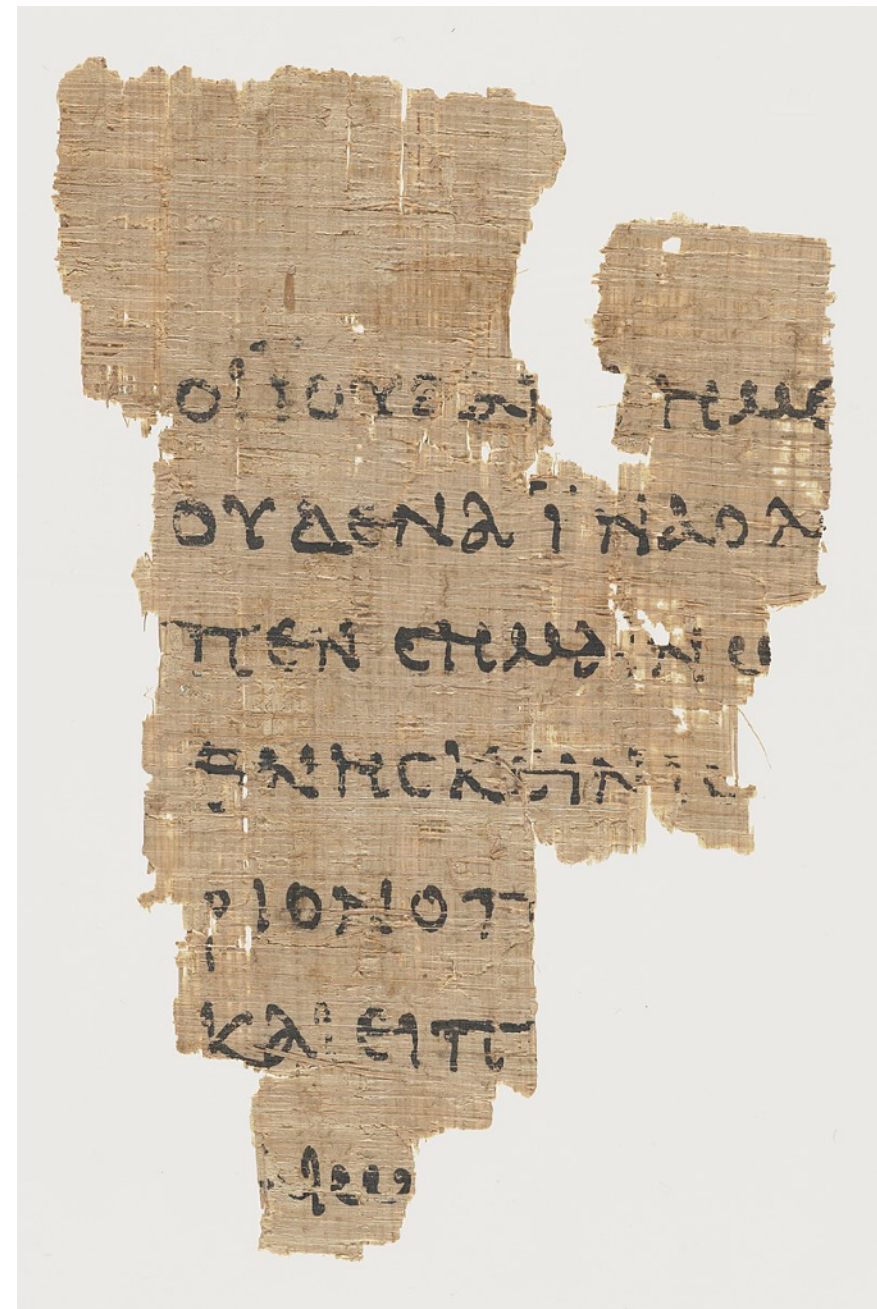
[The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11.]

- Ending of Mark's Gospel

[Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include 16:9–20.]

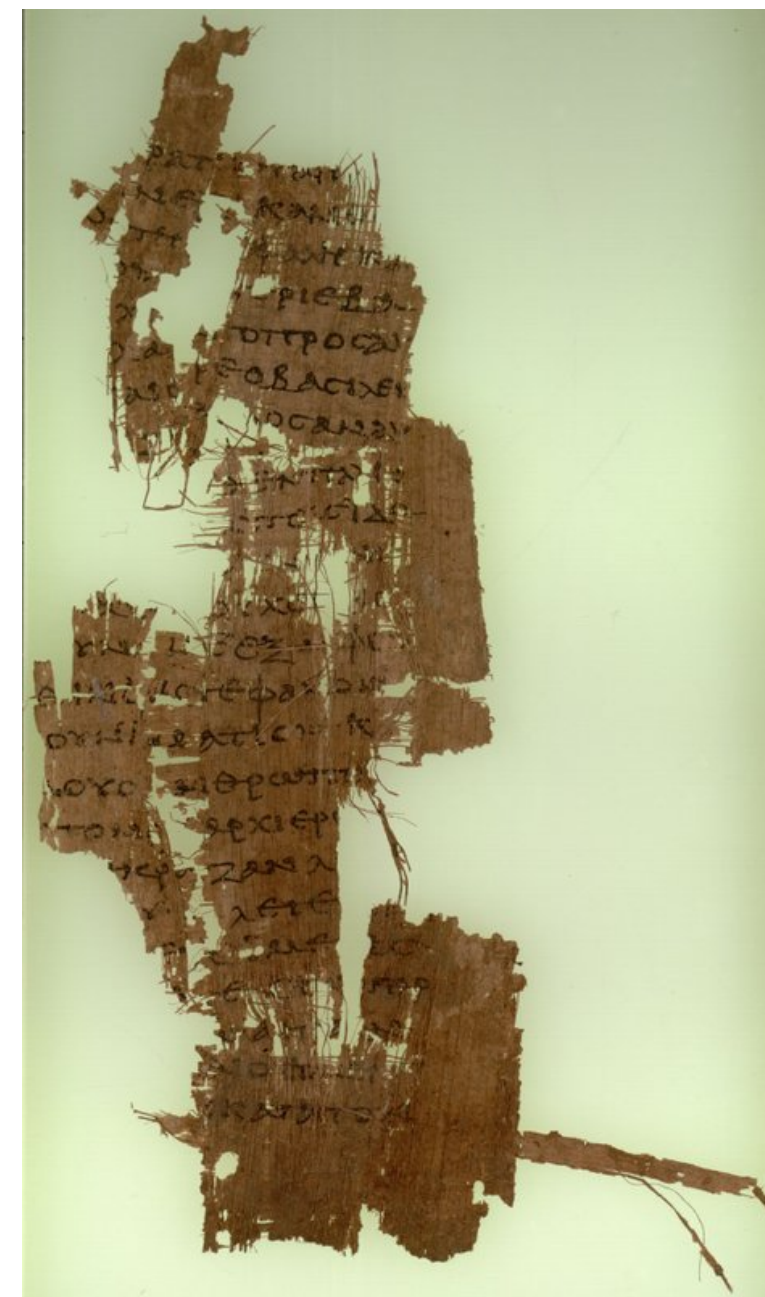
4. The story of the adulteress woman is not found in the earliest copies of John's Gospel (2nd to 4th century).

2nd-century manuscripts of John's Gospel



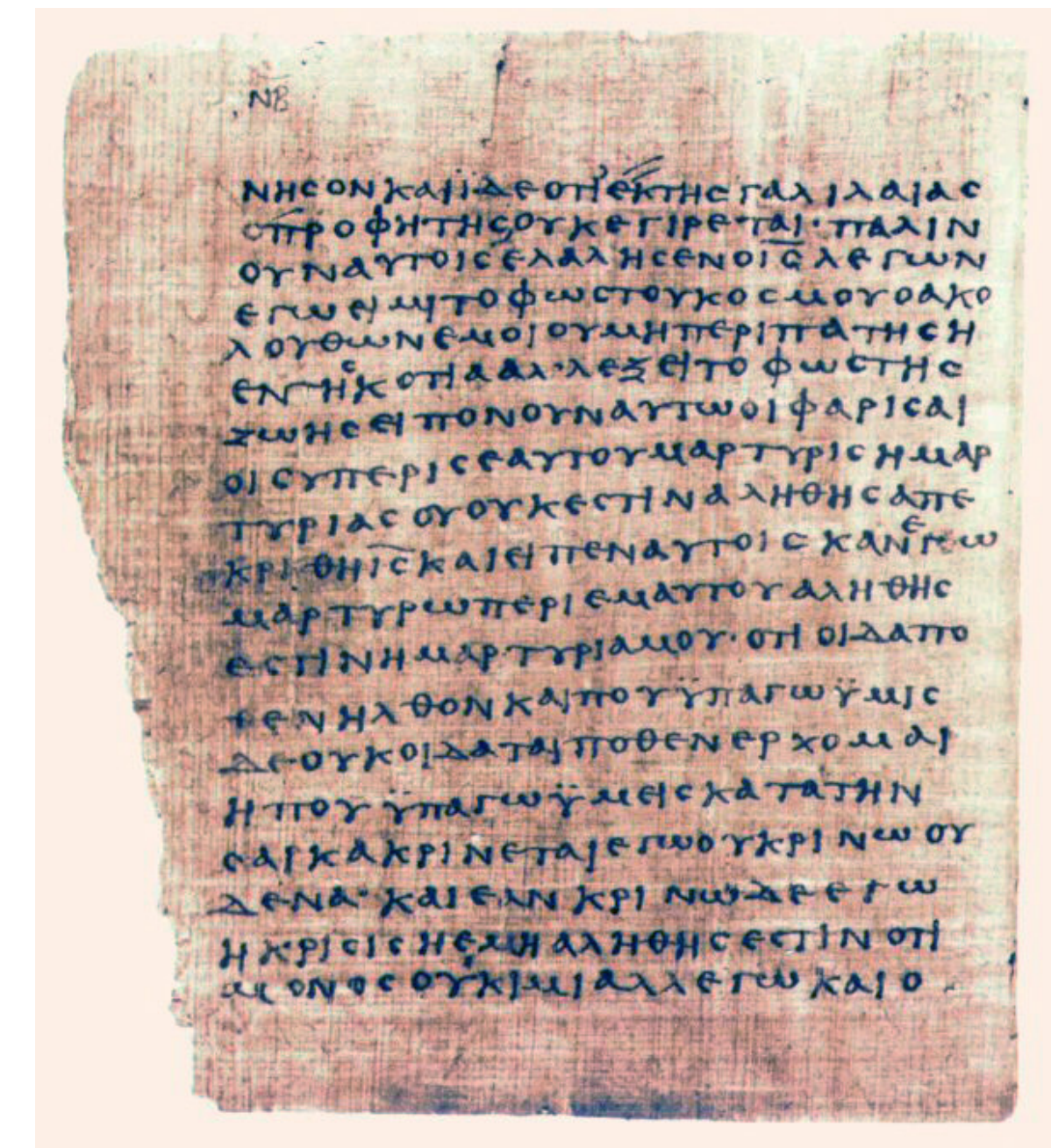
Papyrus 52 (P⁵²)

Found in Egypt in 1934
Contains portions of John 18:31–33
and 18:37–38



Papyrus 90 (P⁹⁰)

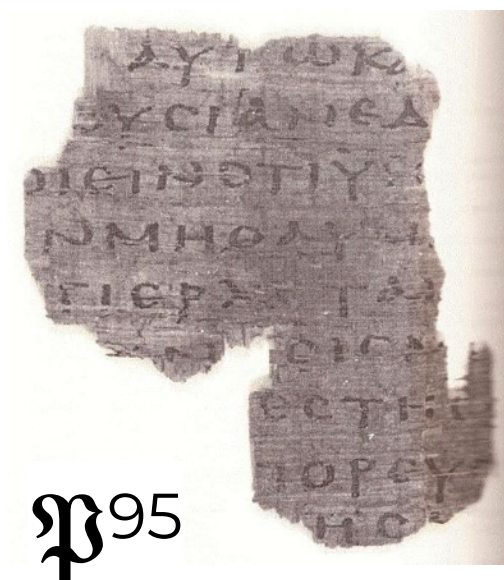
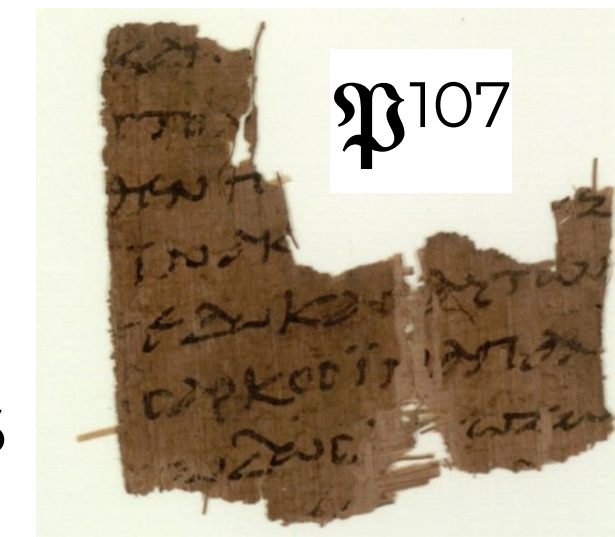
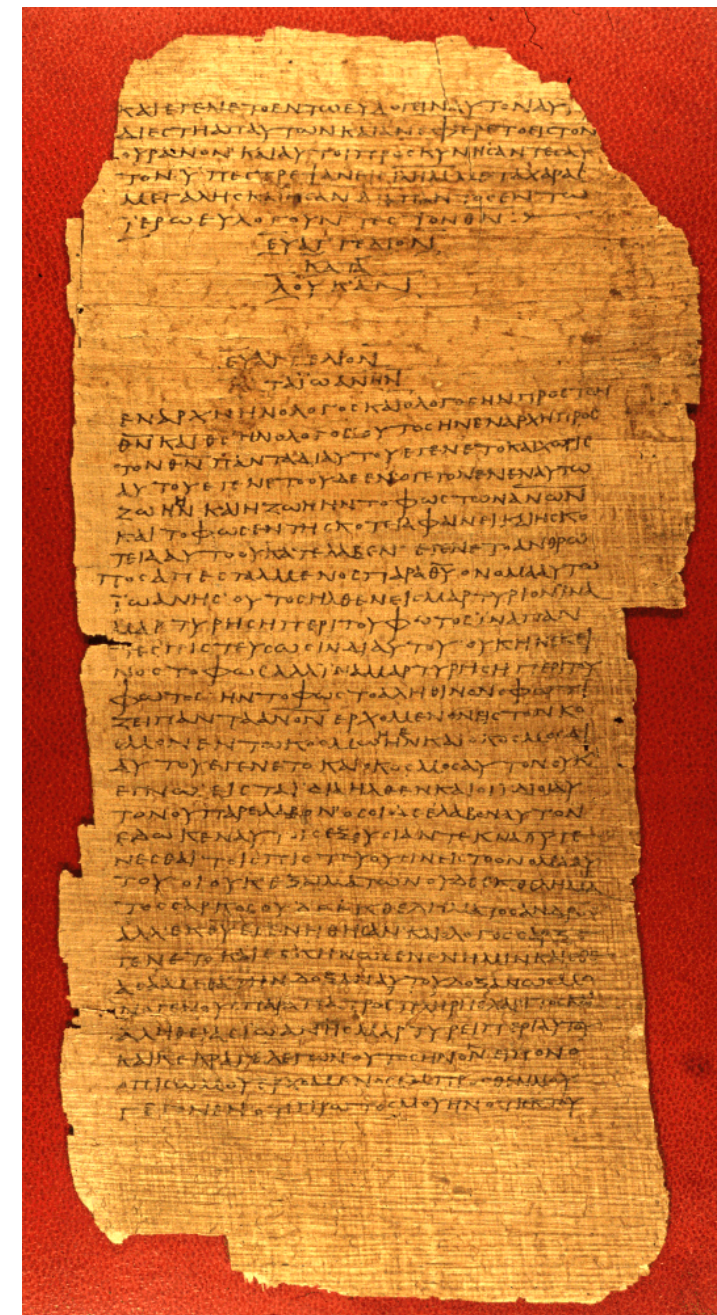
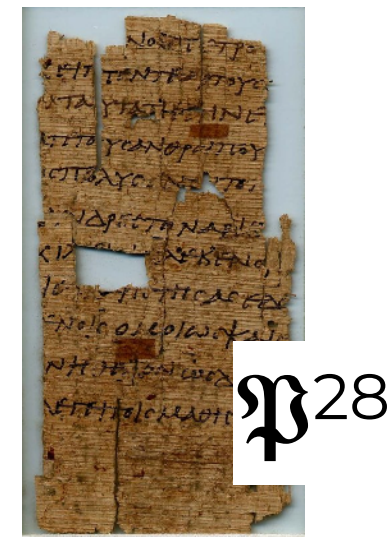
Found in Egypt in 1896
Contains John 18:36-19:7



Papyrus 66 (P⁶⁶)

Found in Egypt in 1952
Contains almost the entire Gospel of John
*Does not include the story of the
adulteress woman*

3rd-century manuscripts



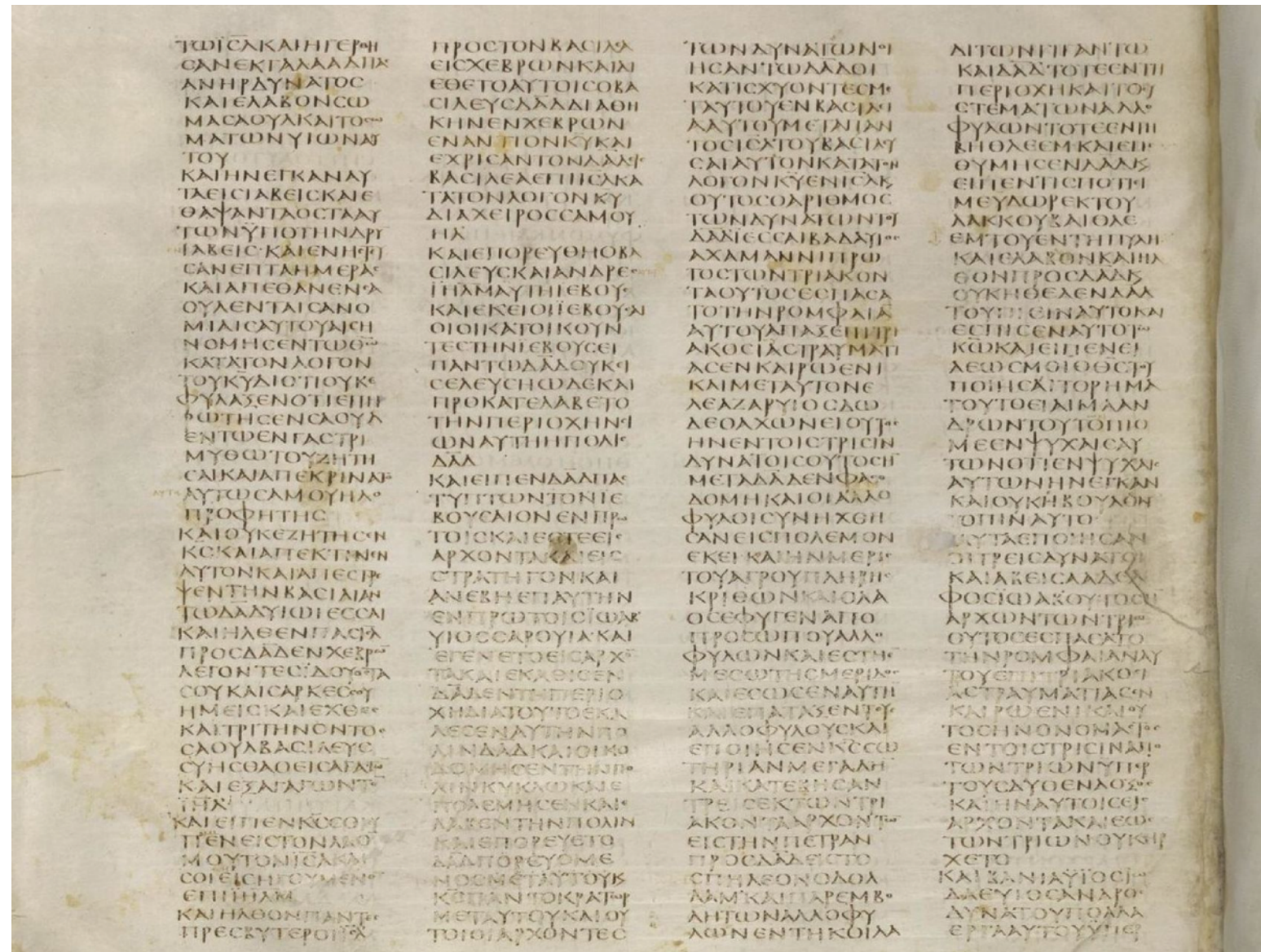
Papyrus 75 (P⁷⁵)

Found in Egypt in the 1950s

Contains John 1:1–15:8

Does not include the story of the adulteress woman

4th century manuscripts



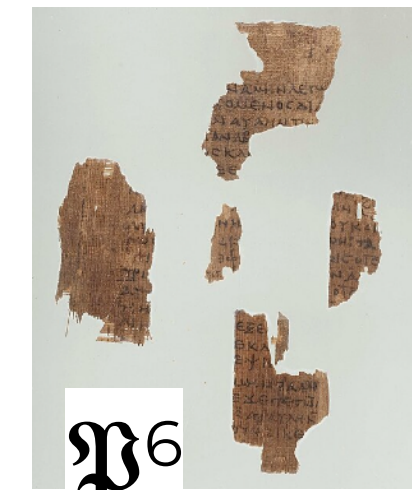
Codex Sinaiticus (Uncial 01)

Found in 1844 in a monastery at Mt. Sinai
 Oldest complete copy of the New Testament
*Does not include the story of
 the adulteress woman*



Codex Vaticanus (Uncial 01)

Provenance unknown
 Complete NT, second only to Sinaiticus
*Does not include the story of
 the adulteress woman*



5. The story of the adulteress woman wasn't mentioned by the Greek church fathers until the 12th century (it wasn't in their Bible).



A Byzantine mosaic of John Chrysostom from the Hagia Sophia

Homilies on the Gospel of John

[Homily 44](#) John 6:26-27

[Homily 45](#) John 6:28-40

[Homily 46](#) John 6:41-52

[Homily 47](#) John 6:53-70

[Homily 48](#) John 7:1-8

[Homily 49](#) John 7:9-24

[Homily 50](#) John 7:25-35

[Homily 51](#) John 7:37-44

[Homily 52](#) John 7:45-8:19

[Homily 53](#) John 8:20-31

[Homily 54](#) John 8:31-46

[Homily 55](#) John 8:48-59

[Homily 56](#) John 9:1-5

[Homily 57](#) John 9:6-16

[Homily 58](#) John 9:17-34

[Homily 59](#) John 9:34-10:12

John 7:52

"Are you also of Galilee?"

2. When they ought to have shown that they had not sent to summon Him without judgment, or that it was not fitting to allow Him speech, they take the reply rather in a rough and [angry](#) manner.

"Search, and look: for out of [Galilee](#) has arisen no [prophet](#)."

Why, what had the man said? That Christ was a [prophet](#)? No; he said, that He ought not to be slain unjudged; but they replied insolently, and as to one who [knew](#) nothing of the [Scriptures](#); as though one had said, "Go, learn," for this is the meaning of, "Search, and look." What then did Christ? Since they were continually dwelling upon [Galilee](#) and "The Prophet," to free all [men](#) from this erroneous suspicion, and to show that He was not one of the [prophets](#), but the Master of the world, He said,

John 8:12

"I am the light of the world."

Not "of [Galilee](#)," not of Palestine, nor of Judæa. What then say the [Jews](#)?

*So... where does the story
come from, and why is it in
our Bibles at all?*

6. The story of the adulteress woman was likely a cherished oral tradition that was later added to some copies of John's Gospel as a way to preserve it.

Possible 3rd-century allusions to the story

- **Eusebius's *Church History*** — “Papias ... provides another story about a woman falsely accused before the Lord of many sins, which is contained in the Gospel of the Hebrews.”
- *Note that Eusebius does not know this story from the Gospel of John, but from the Gospel of Hebrews (not accepted as Scripture but still well known)*
- ***Didascalia Apostolorum*** — “...do even as He did with her who had sinned, whom the elders placed before Him, and leaving the judgment in His hands, and departed. But He, the searcher of hearts, asked her and said to her: ‘Have the elders condemned you, my daughter?’ She said to him: ‘Nay Lord.’ And He said unto her: ‘Go, neither do I condemn you.’”



4th-century reference to a version of the story

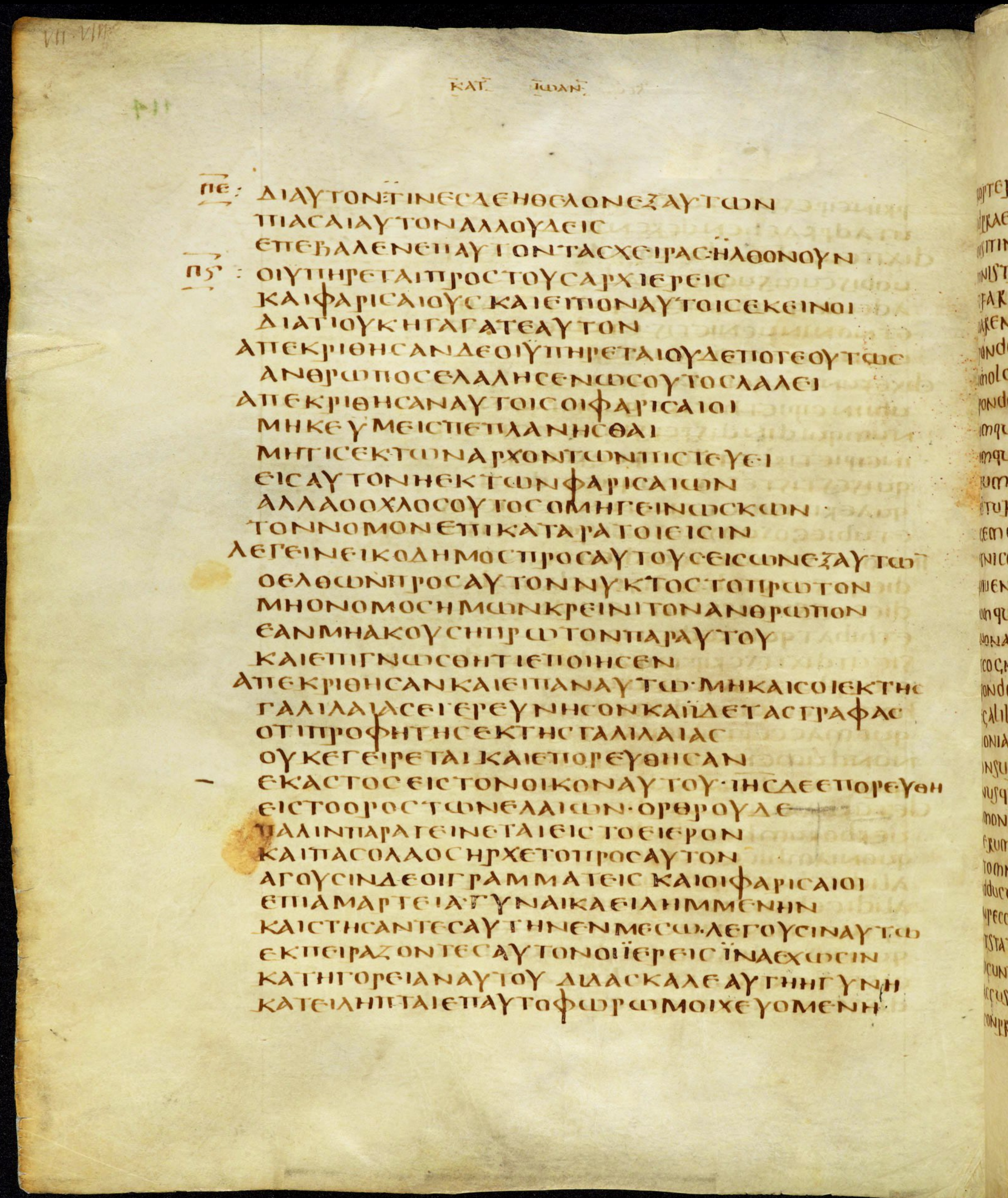
- **Didymus the Blind, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*** — “We find, therefore, in certain Gospels [the following story]. A woman, it says, was condemned by the Jews for a sin and was being sent to be stoned in the place where it was customary to happen. The savior, it says, when he saw her and observed that they were ready to stone her, said to those who were about to cast stones, ‘He who has not sinned, let him take up 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 in some things, they did not dare to strike her.” (223.6b–13a)
- *Note that Didymus refers to this story being in “certain Gospels,” which almost certainly means Gospels other than the Gospel of John (perhaps the Gospel of Hebrews, referred to by Eusebius).*



Earliest manuscript evidence for the story

- The earliest manuscript evidence for the story of the adulteress woman is found in the early 5th century in Codex Bezae (a Greek-Latin manuscript of the NT).
- The story is marked out in the margins, indicating that it was treated differently than the rest of the text.

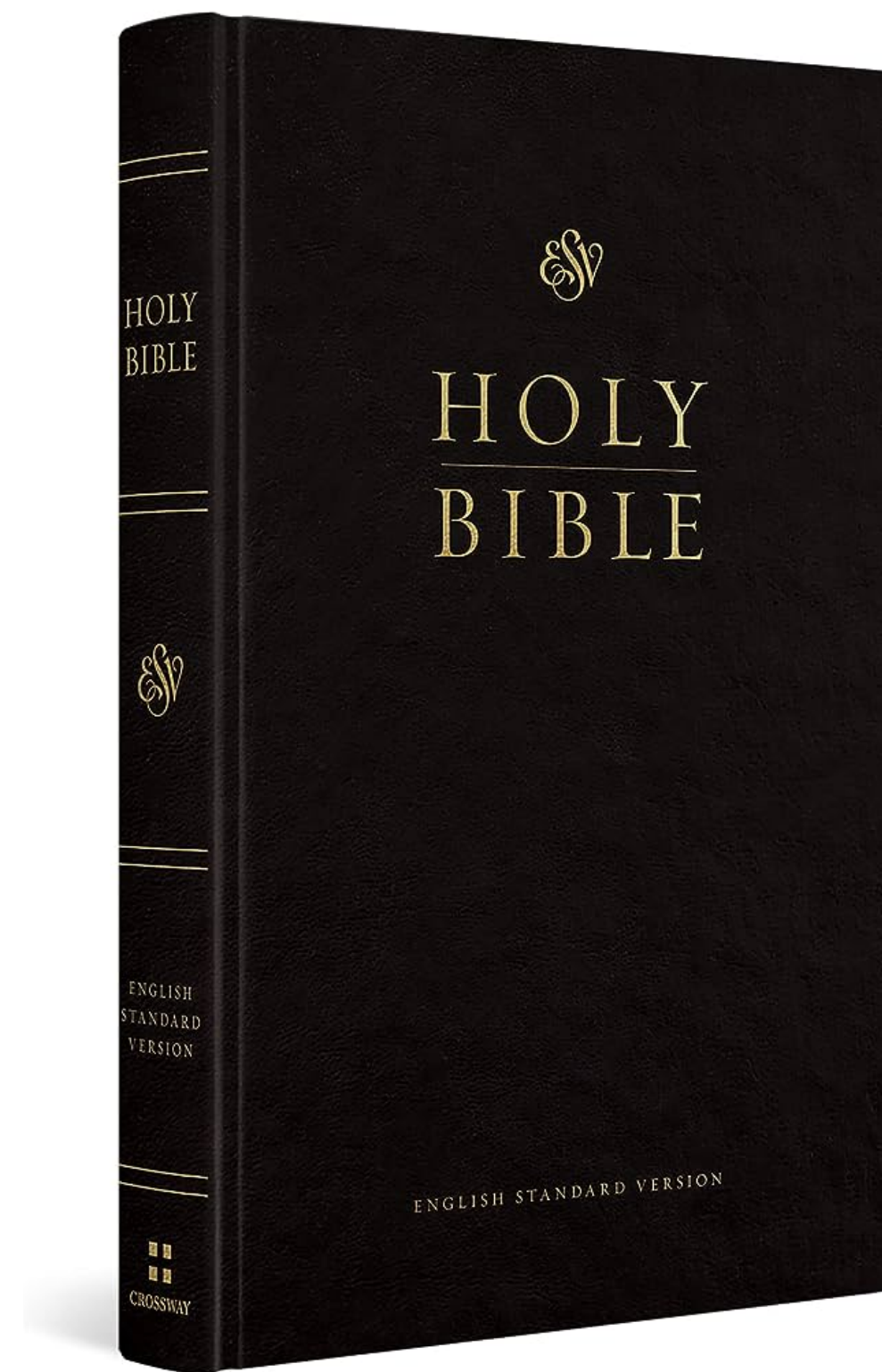
Codex Bezae (Uncial 05)



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ΑΓΟΥΣΙΝ ΔΕ ΟΙ ΓΡΑΜΜΑΤΕΙΣ ΚΑΙ ΟΙ ΦΑΡΙΣΑΙΟΙ
ΕΠΙ ΑΜΑΡΤΕΙΑ ΓΥΝΑΙΚΑ ΕΙΛΗΜΜΕΝΗΝ
ΚΑΙ ΣΤΗΣΑΝΤΕΣ ΑΥΤΗΝ ΕΝ ΜΕΣΩ ΛΕΓΟΥΣΙΝ ΑΥΤΩ
ΕΚ ΠΕΙΡΑΖΟΝΤΕΣ ΑΥΤΟΝ ΟΙ ΙΕΡΕΙΣ ΙΝ ΔΕΧΩΣΙΝ
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ΚΑΤΕΙΛΗΠΤΑΙ ΕΠΑΥΤΟ ΦΩΡΩ ΜΟΙΧΕΥΟΜΕΝΗ

Varying Text and Location

- While the story begins to appear in manuscripts in the fifth century, it is **not always at the same place**. Sometimes it's even inserted in Luke's Gospel.
- The text of the story also varies from manuscript to manuscript.

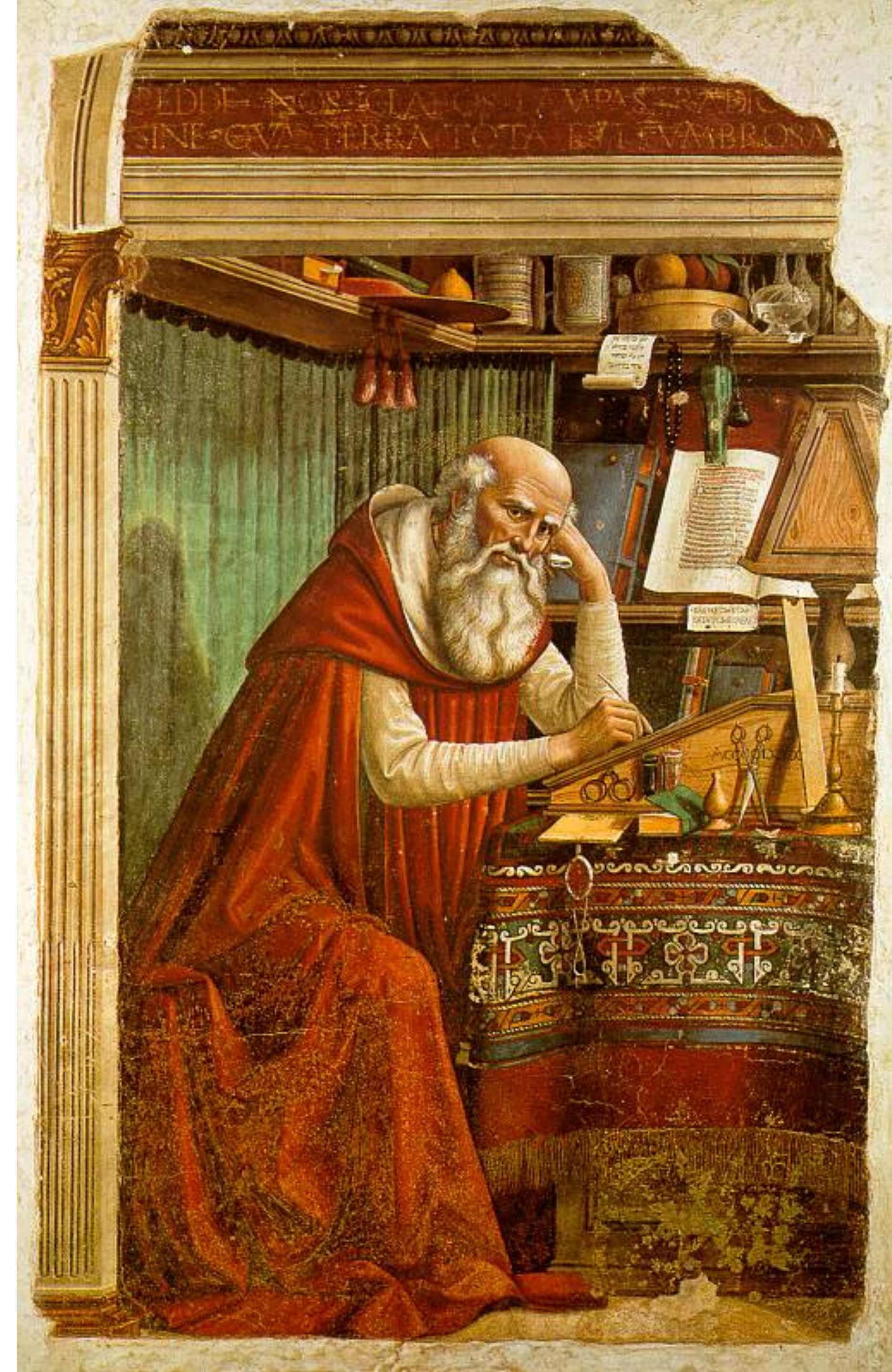


ESV Footnote

g. “John 7:53 Some manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11; others add the passage here or after 7:36 or after 21:25 or after Luke 21:38, with variations in the text”

4th/5th c. Western Fathers

- **Ambrose** (c. 340–397 AD) knew the story from John and cited it in different writings but in varying textual form (may have translated it himself from one or more Greek manuscripts).
- **Augustine** knew the story but noted that it was not in all copies of John's Gospel.
- **Jerome** cited the passage in an argument against the Pelagians, he mentioned that he found it “in many copies of the Gospel of John.”



Best Explanation

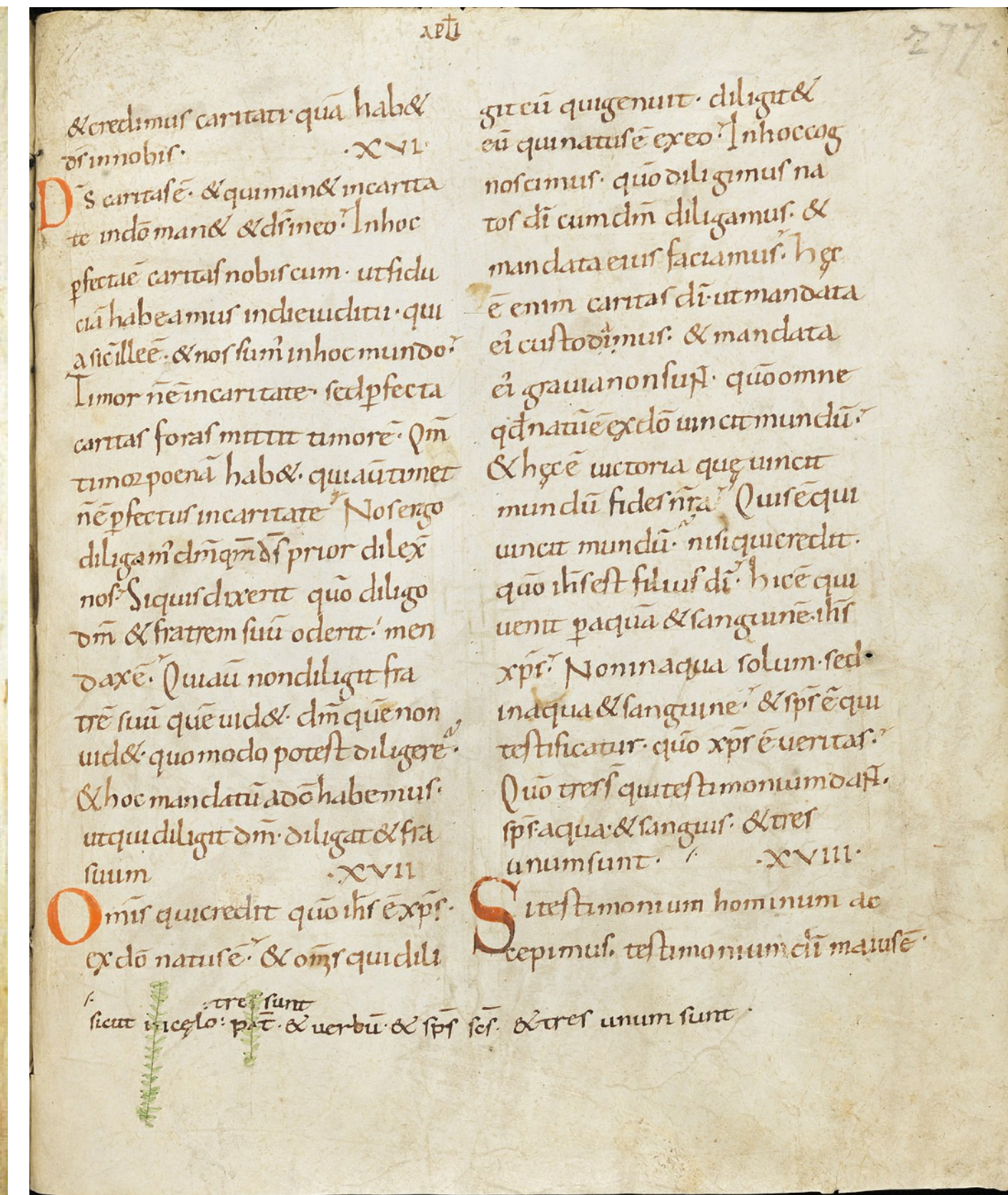
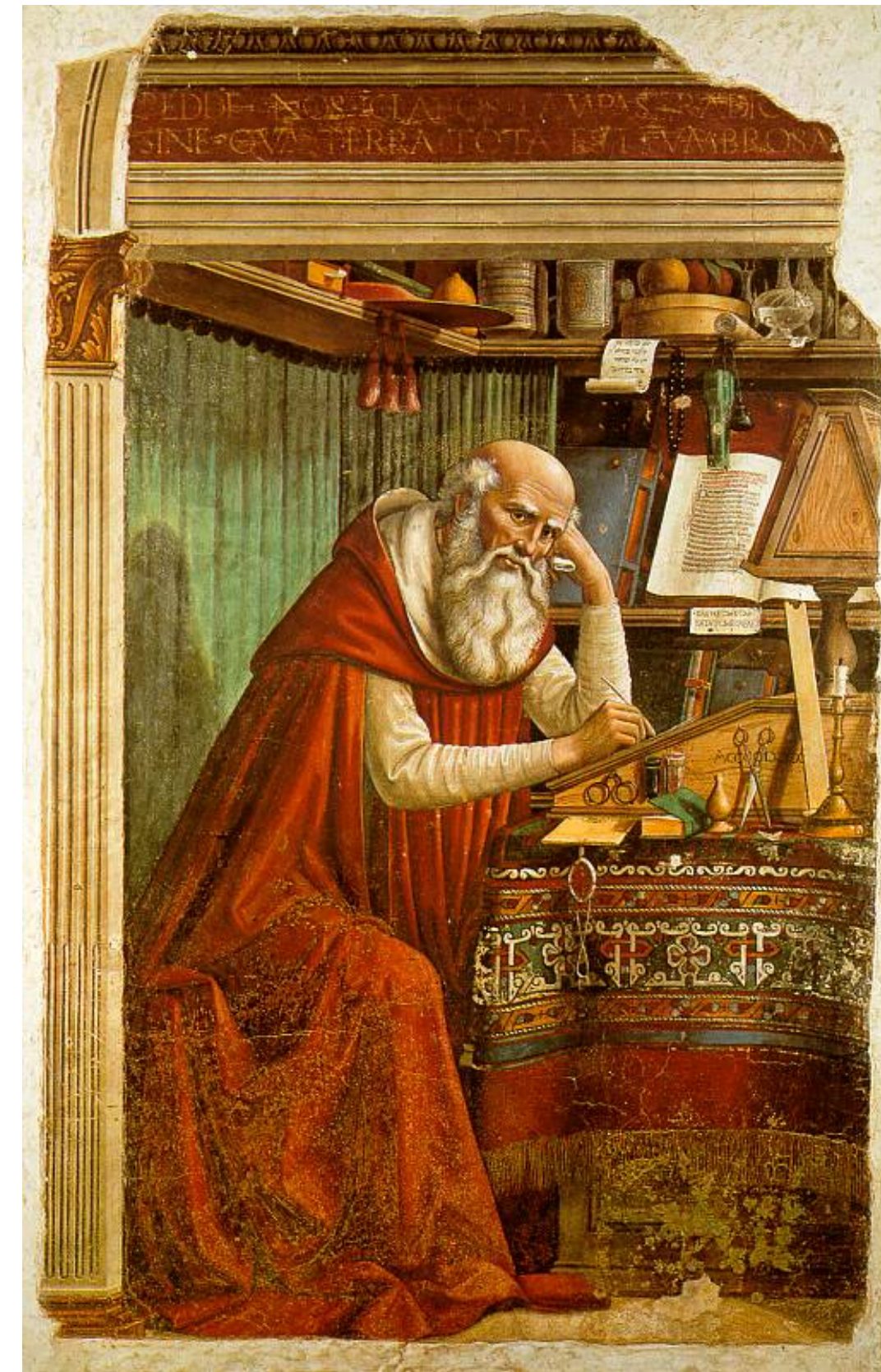
The best explanation, given the evidence that we now have, is that the story of the woman caught in adultery...

- was not written by John and was not originally part of his Gospel
- was nevertheless a true story (or based on a true story) that was passed down by generations of Christians
- was included by scribes at various places as a way to preserve the story
- eventually found a settled place in many manuscripts after John 7:52

7. The place of the story was solidified in the West because Jerome included it in his Latin translation of the Bible (the Vulgate).

The Vulgate (Latin Translation of the Bible)

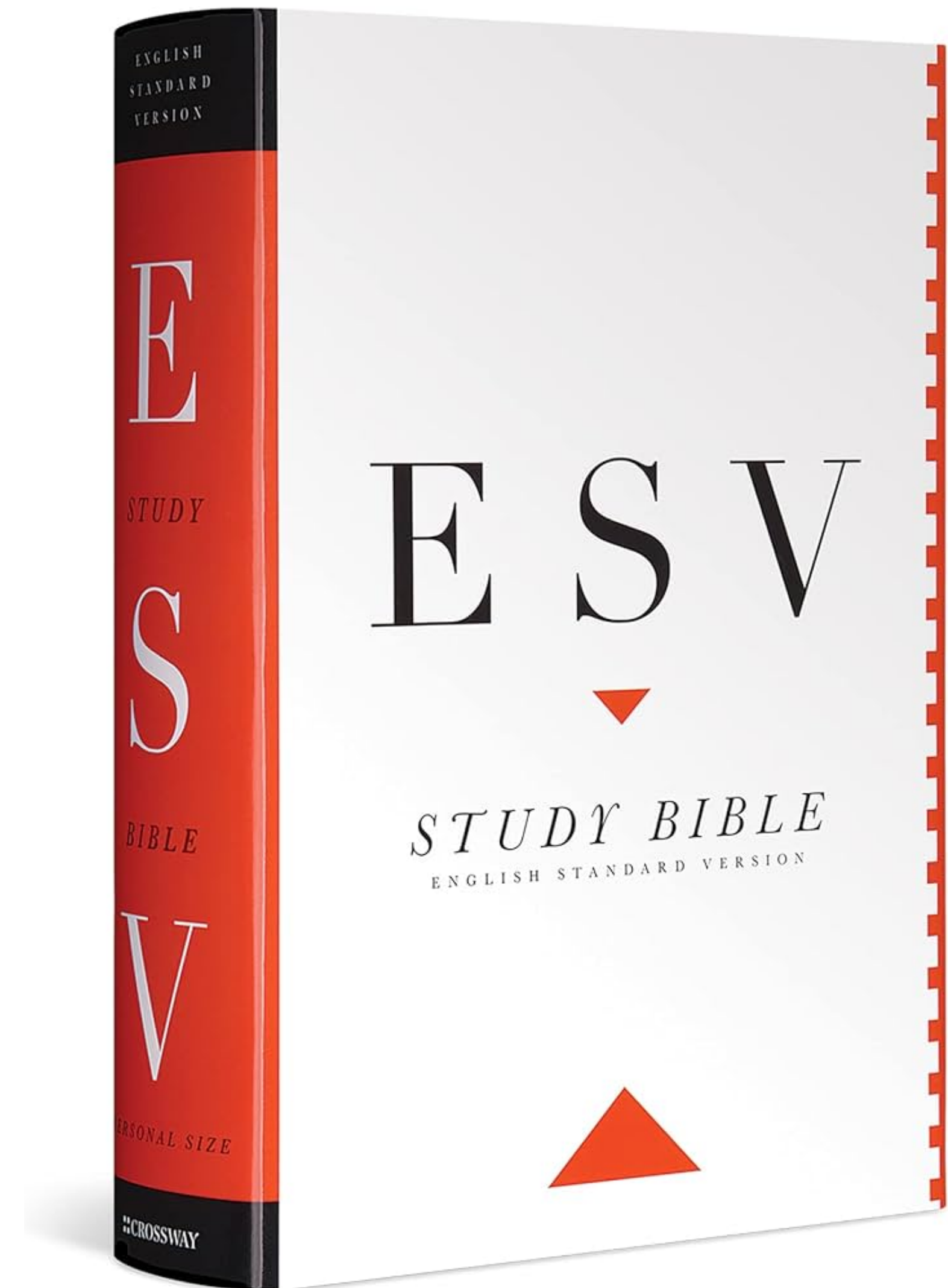
- In 404 AD, the Bible was translated by Jerome into Latin, the common language of the West.
- The Vulgate was the most influential version of the Bible until the Protestant Reformation.
- In the 1450s, it was the first book printed on Gutenberg's printing press.



8. Since only the original Greek text is inspired by God, most modern Bible translators have taken a wise and conservative approach, including the beloved story but bracketing it off from Holy Scripture.

Modern Bible Translations

1. Modern translations like the ESV are very conservative and are not trying to undermine the Bible. *They are trying to be careful about what is truly God's inspired Word.*
2. When it looks like the ESV has “removed” something from the Bible, it is more likely that the KJV inadvertently “added” something based on the manuscript evidence they had at the time. *Whatever the case, these differences do not affect any major Christian belief.*



We can continue to cherish and preach the story of the woman caught in adultery, since it was obviously highly valued by previous generations of Christians. *We just need to be honest about its origin and its place in the Bible.*

Perspectives on the Story of the Adulteress Woman

- D. A. Carson — “**There is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred**, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books.”
- Leon Morris — “If we cannot feel that this is part of John’s Gospel, we can feel that **the story is true to the character of Jesus**. Throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, **this little story is authentic. It rings true.**”
- John Piper — “[Is the story historical?] Perhaps. I would like to think so. Who doesn’t love this story? But that does not give it the authority of Scripture. So what I will do is take its most remarkable point and show that it is true on the basis of other parts of Scripture, and so **let this story not be the basis of our authority, but an echo and a pointer to our authority, namely, the Scriptures, that teach what it says.**”

The Truth of the Story of the Adulteress

Next week, we will consider the truth of the story of the woman caught in adultery:

- Jesus came to save sinners, not to condemn them (John 3:17).
- Jesus calls us to “sin no more” (John 5:14).
- We should take the log out of our own eye before taking the speck out of our brother’s eye (Matthew 7:1–5).
- We should follow Jesus’s example of mercy and forgiveness (Matthew 5:7)

