

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

***To Cast the First Stone: The Transmission of a Gospel Story.* By Jennifer Knust and Tommy Wasserman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. xix + 440 pp. \$45.00 cloth.**

“Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone” is one of the most well-known utterances attributed to Jesus, one quoted broadly and liberally in a wide variety of settings over many centuries. Yet, as biblical scholars know, the story from which this utterance derives was not always “biblical.” Contemporary editions and translations of the New Testament conventionally place the story at the end of chapter 7 of the Gospel of John (7:52–8:11), yet a careful reader will notice that the various typographical and paratextual markings of the text suggest that all is not self-evident when it comes to the story of the woman caught in adultery, or the *pericope adulterae* as it is known to scholars. Indeed, text critics have achieved a virtual consensus that the passage made its way into the canonical Gospel of John as a late-ancient interpolation by a well-meaning scribe or editor and was not part of the “initial” text (to use text critics’ preferred term, rather than “original” text). In accounting for how this interpolation occurred and what it means for thinking about the very notion of “gospel,” New Testament scholars Jennifer Knust and Tommy Wasserman have collaborated to produce a stellar work of singular erudition that documents and narrates the complicated transmission history of this “well-loved” story (204, 209) of how ancient and medieval scholars and scribes, homilists and liturgists, artists and artisans made a place for this bit of (low-ercase) gospel in the canonical Gospel of John.

The monograph begins with an exhaustive survey and evaluation of modern scholarship on the *pericope*, showing how the debates surrounding this text and a handful of others (e.g., the longer ending of the Gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus in the garden sweating blood, and the story of the angel of Bethesda in John 5) contributed to much broader debates over questions of (text-critical and historical-critical) method, authority and canonicity, orthodoxy and heresy, and more. Textual variations are not merely the raw material for text critics interested in establishing critical editions of ancient sources; they also raise profound questions about the fixity, stability, and reliability of the biblical text itself—presenting a challenge, in other words, not only to the scientific approach to textual study but also to the religious communities that depend upon the idea of a fixed scripture as a singular authority.

Knust and Wasserman take their readers through a dizzying array of Latin and Byzantine manuscript traditions, philological and interpretive debates, histories of late ancient and medieval book cultures and scribal practices, and histories of liturgy, preaching, and art-making to show that “public performances of the story’s importance had a greater influence on perceptions of the passage’s canonicity than the deliberations of literate experts” (310). Each chapter is a model of clarity, comprehensiveness, and careful curation and adjudication of evidence spanning several centuries and multiple cultural contexts. One cannot do justice in a short review to all of the detailed evidence amassed by these two scholars working at a very high level of expertise and critical acumen. It is to their shared credit that they write about all of this detailed and technical

material in a fashion that will allow the nonspecialist reader entrée into the complex world of textual criticism and its sometimes arcane and esoteric findings while also keeping the broader arc of the historical narrative highlighted and in plain view.

In the midst of all of their technical detail and careful, critical analysis, Knust and Wasserman also bring a salutary sympathy to their reading of this story's complicated and still somewhat mysterious transmission history and the many generations of people whose intellectual and creative labor contributed to what they call the story's "tenacity." Part way through my first reading of the book, I began to note how often the terms "well-loved" and "beloved" appeared as adjectives for the story—almost a dozen times, by my count—reminding one how a *feeling for the text* travels alongside (and perhaps even inside) the scholarly and scientific precision applied to it. When they speak repeatedly of the "scrupulous" nature of the scribes, editors, and interpreters of the story, one is reminded that *care* for the text occurs in a variety of ways: in the conservative/conservationist attitudes of theologians, interpreters, and scholars from late antiquity to the modern period and in the creative work of adaptation that one encounters in artistic renderings of the story from late antiquity into the early medieval period—and in further modern adaptations and citations, like Seamus Heaney's haunting poem "Punishment," first published in 1975, a discussion of which appears in the early pages of the book's introduction. They conclude their work with a short quotation from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* which elevates "unhistoric acts" undertaken by "the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs" (344). That Knust and Wasserman bookend their deft and remarkable scholarly work with evocative citations of two literary sets of graves—one belonging to the anonymous strangled girl in Heaney's indicting and confessional poem, the other to those of the unnamed performers of unhistoric acts in Eliot's elegiac prose—strikes me as a beautiful and haunting echo of both the affective tone of the pericope itself as well as what remains opaque and inaccessible in the convoluted history of that story's transmission into the pages of modern critical editions of the New Testament.

Knust and Wasserman, each an established and highly respected scholar in her or his own right, possess overlapping and complementary arenas of expertise. They are to be congratulated for their collaboration that is nearly seamless in presentation, blending their distinctive scholarly gifts into a monograph that challenges us to think more broadly and anew about how stories became gospels became books became scripture—and how technical expertise travels alongside quotidian and care-filled use to make that process unfold.

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***Ancient Christian Eco-poetics: Cosmologies, Saints, Things.* By Virginia Burrus. Divinations: Rereading Late Antique Religion. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. vii + 288 pp. \$65.00 cloth.**

How did late ancient Christians think about nature? This is not Virginia Burrus's question, but her erudite and evocative new book *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics: Cosmologies, Saints, Things* helps answer it. To be clear, *Ancient Christian Eco-poetics* is not a book