

What Did Jesus Write on the Ground for the Adulterous Woman?

It has long been a mystery what Jesus wrote on the ground the day the scribes and Pharisees dragged an adulterous woman before Him (John 8:3-11).

One day, as I was reading in Jeremiah, I was surprised to find the answer hidden deep in the Old Testament.

The scribes and Pharisees had demanded that He sentence the woman to death, as taught in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-24.

[The NASB Study Bible notes that “they altered the law a little. The manner of execution was not prescribed unless the woman was a betrothed virgin. And the law required the execution of both parties, not just the woman.”]

If Jesus had said to stone her, they would have charged Him with hypocrisy, since He was always teaching about mercy. If He said *not* to stone her, they would have charged Him with breaking the mosaic law.

Spotting their trick, He stooped down and wrote something on the ground, saying:

“Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7, MEV).

He then proceeded to write something *else* on the ground, after which they dropped their stones and walked away.

What was it then that Jesus wrote on the ground?

“O Lord, the Hope of Israel, all who forsake You will be

ashamed. ‘Those who depart from Me in the earth will be written down, because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters” (Jer. 17:13).

This passage seems to indicate that Jesus first wrote their names in the dust and perhaps then wrote a sin that they had committed next to their name. Busted by Jesus, they walked away in shame and frustration. You see, being Yahweh, He knew what was in their hearts. (See 1 Chr. 28:9; Matt. 12:25, 22:18; John 2:25; 1 Cor. 14:25).

According to the Venerable Bede (as well as St. Augustine), when Jesus wrote on the ground with His finger, He was harkening back to the time on Mount Sinai when He had written the Ten Commandments on stone tablets with His finger (Ex. 32:15-16). In other words, the same finger that had written the law back then was also the finger that was writing on the ground now.

Therefore, since He was the author of the law, He was the one to properly interpret and execute it (Ex. 31:18; Deut. 9:10).

Additionally, being the one who was soon to receive the penalty for the sins of the adulterous woman upon Himself, He had every right to extend grace and mercy to her.

It is interesting to note that in Luke 11:20, Jesus referred to the “finger of God” when He drove the demon out of a man who could not speak. The crowd had accused Him of driving the demon out by the power of Beelzebub—the prince of demons. In response, and for those with eyes to see it, Jesus’ “finger of God” language indicated that He was the same God who wrote the law on the stone tablets and was therefore God Himself.

A final observation: We should note that since God had created man “out of the dust” (Gen. 2:7)—and since He had come to “write the law on people’s hearts” (Jer. 31:33; Ps. 37:31; Rom. 2:14-15; 2 Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:10, 10:16)—it is likely that in His interaction with the scribes and Pharisees that day, He

had, in a sense, written the supreme call to *mercy* in the dust, sending the message that those who refuse mercy will not receive mercy (James 2:12-13). “Be therefore merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

That allows us to circle back to see one final message to the Pharisees: “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1a).

That is the ultimate fulfillment of the law.

“For you are prominently declared to be the letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on human tablets of the heart” (2 Cor. 3:3). {eoa}

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