

MISCELLANEOUS  
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHAT DID JESUS WRITE  
ACCORDING TO  
JOHN 8:6b–8?

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**VIII**  
**WHAT DID JESUS WRITE**  
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**John 8:6b–8**

ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς κάτω κύψας τῷ δακτύλῳ  
κατέγραφεν εἰς τὴν γῆν.  
ὡς δὲ ἐπέμενον ἐρωτῶντες αὐτόν,  
ἀνέκυψεν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς,  
‘Ὁ ἀναμάρτητος<sup>1</sup> ὑμῶν πρῶτος ἐπ’ αὐτὴν βαλέτω λίθον.  
καὶ πάλιν κατακύψας ἔγραφεν εἰς τὴν γῆν.

And Jesus, having bent down, with the finger  
was writing on the ground,  
and when they continued asking him,  
having straighten up said to them,  
“The sinless<sup>1</sup> of you – first let him cast the stone at her.”  
And again having stooped down,  
he was writing on the ground.

J. H. Bernard (1928: 715) begins his commentary on the “Pericope de Adultera” in John 7:53–8:11 by stating that

THE section (περικοπή) of the Fourth Gospel which contains this incident is contained in many late manuscripts and versions, but it cannot be regarded as Johannine or as part of the Gospel text. It is not found in any of the early Greek uncials, with the single exception of Codex Bezae (D), . . . The section is omitted also in important cursives, *e.g.* 22, 33, 565 (in which minuscule there is a note that the scribe knew of its existence).

Years later Raymond Brown (1966: 335) agreed, affirming that the pericope was clearly a later insertion into the Fourth Gospel.

This passage is not found in any of the important early Greek textual witnesses of Eastern provenance (*e.g.*, in neither

Bodmer papyrus); nor is it found in the Old Syriac or the Coptic. There are no comments on this passage by the Greek writers on John of the 1st Christian millennium, and it is only from ca. 900 that it begins to appear in the standard Greek text. . . . The 3rd-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* II 24:6; Funk ed., I, 93) gives a clear reference to the story of the adulteress and uses it as a presumably well-known example of our Lord's gentleness; this work is of Syrian origin, and the reference means that this story was known (but not necessarily as Scripture) in 2nd-century Syria.<sup>2</sup>

Tregelles (1854: 240) noted, "the peculiarities of the language [in Jn 7:53–8:11] are indeed remarkable, and very unlike anything else in St. John's Gospel; but to this it might be said, that the copies differ so much that it is almost impossible to judge what the true phraseology is."<sup>3</sup> For example, though John 7:53–8:11 does not appear at all in the Old Syriac versions, in the later Peshitta texts (as in the London Polyglott of 1657)<sup>4</sup> there is no word in John 8:6b for the Greek τῷ δακτύλῳ "with the finger." It simply reads,

ישוע דין כד לתחת אתגהן מכתב הוא על ארעא

"While Jesus was bent down he was writing on the ground."<sup>5</sup> (By way of contrast, most English translations add a word by rendering the τῷ δακτύλῳ as "with *his* finger," as though a possessive αὐτοῦ were in the Greek text.)

The fact that κατέγραφεν "he was writing/registering/drawing" appears in 8:6, in contrast to the ἔγραφεν "he was writing," in 8:8, led Bernard (1928: 719) to conclude that

. . . on this occasion He was only scribbling with His finger on the ground, a mechanical action which would suggest only an unwillingness to speak on the subject brought before Him, and preoccupation with His own thoughts.

Brown (1966: 334) came to a similar conclusion, stating, ". . . Jesus was simply tracing lines on the ground while he was

thinking, or wished to show imperturbability, or to contain his feeling of disgust for the violent zeal shown by the accusers.” He called attention to Power’s article in *Biblica* (1921: 54–57) with examples from Arabic literature of people doodling on the ground when distraught.<sup>6</sup>

However, the parallel of Jesus’ writing before he spoke and the Roman legal practice of having a judge write his sentence before reading it aloud (as noted by T. W. Manson [1952–53: 255–256] and cited by Brown) is significant. It matches the authority of the *written* word found in biblical tradition (the phrase “as it is written” appears forty-five times in the KJV and forty-six times in the RSV). In this context Darrett’s words (1964: 17) are noteworthy:

Everything points to Jesus’ concerns for the woman’s position, though not in any particular sympathy for her. It points in any case serious reflexion. He was concerned, to judge from the oral reply, that whatever was to be done should be done in righteousness. *The two acts of writing therefore ought to have formed a piece with the oral reply, and can be most easily and naturally explained as acts directed towards the establishment of law* [my italics]. If this is so the possibilities are very few, and our choice is greatly limited.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas Darrett’s choice involved the unpointed רשע of Exod 23:1b as the clue for identifying what Jesus may have written, a better choice is to consider what may have been the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the two verses dealing with Jesus’ writing. A literal back translation into a consonantal Hebrew text—with the deliberate underlined dittography of three letters in 8:6b—produces the following text and translation which includes two rare Hebrew lexemes:

ושחה ישוע כתב בצבע  
 צבעו על העפר  
 וכאשר הוסיפו לשאל אתו

קם ואמר אליהם  
האיש מכם בלי עון  
ראשון יסקל עליה אבן  
ושחה שנית כתב על העפר:

Bending over Jesus wrote with the finger  
his *religious-decision* in the dust;  
and when they continued to ask him  
he rose up and said to them,  
“The man from you without sin,  
first let him cast a stone upon her.”

And stooping over again he wrote about *forgiveness*.<sup>8</sup>

The first **צבע** in this reconstructed *Vorlage* is a variant of **צָבַע**/**צָבַעָא**, “finger” from **צבע**, stem II, the cognate of Arabic **صَبَاع** (*ṣubāʿ*) and **أَصْبَع** (*ʾiṣbaʿ*) “finger”—spelled with an **ع** (*ʿayin*) as the third letter of the stem.<sup>9</sup>

The underlined second **צבע** “religious decision/opinion” is the cognate of the Arabic **صِبْغَة** (*ṣibġat*)—spelled with an **غ** (*ġayin*) as the last letter of the stem—meaning “religion, religious law.” It is a synonym of (1) **دين** (*dīn*) “religious judgment,” (2) **ملة** (*millat*) “religious practice,” and (3) **شريعة** (*ṣarīʿat*) “religious law and anything whereby one advances himself in the order of God” (Lane 1872: 1648).<sup>10</sup>

Because the Hebrew **ע** appears for the cognate **ع** (*ʿayin*) and **غ** (*ġayin*), homographs of distinctly different words may appear. Such is the case for the **בצבע צבעו** in the reconstructed *Vorlage* above. Once written the two words appeared as though they were a dittography of one word, resulting in a scribal pseudo-correction of eliminating one of the words, or, in the case of the *Vorlage* of the Peshiṭta, both words.

In the above reconstructed *Vorlage* the **עַל הָעֶפֶר** “upon the dust” in John 8:6b is not the same as the **עַל הָעֶפֶר** in John 8:8. The Hebrew **עֶפֶר** is a homograph for four lexemes: (1) **עֶפֶר** “dry earth, dust,” (2) **עֶפֶר** “young hart, stag,” (3) **עֶפֶר** “small creeping beast, insect, reptile rodent,” which appears in Gen 3:14,<sup>11</sup> and (4) **עֶפֶר** “forgiveness” which appears here in the *Vorlage* of John 8:8. This **עֶפֶר**, stem IV, is the cognate of the Arabic **غَفَرَ** (*ḡafara*) “he (God) covered, his sin, crime, offence; he forgave it; pardoned it; . . . [with] **غُفْرَانٍ** (*ḡufrān*) and **مَغْفِرَةٌ** (*maḡfirat*), on the part of God, signifying the preserving a man from being touched by punishment.” The nouns **غَافِرٍ** (*ḡāfir*) and **غَفُورٍ** (*ḡafūr*) are epithets of God meaning, “covering and forgiving the sins, crimes, and offences, of his people” (Lane 1877: 2273–2274). Wehr (1979: 794) noted that **عِيدُ الْغُفْرَانِ** (*‘id alḡufrān*) is the “Day of Atonement,” *Yom Kippur*. This **עֶפֶר** is a synonym of **מַחֵל** and **סָלַח**.

With the recovery of these two lost words, **יִצְבֵּעַ** “religious decision/opinion” and **עֶפֶר** “forgiveness” Darrett’s statement (1964: 17) that “the two acts of writing therefore ought to have formed a piece with the oral reply, and can be most easily and naturally explained as acts directed towards the establishment of law,” are right on target. Jesus was writing in the dust (1) his answer to the scribes and Pharisees, and (2) his word of forgiveness for the woman. There was no doodling or scribbling.<sup>12</sup> He was focused and careful, for a woman’s life was at stake. Once he had written out his **יִצְבֵּעַ** “religious decision/opinion” in response to the question addressed to him (8:6b), he stood and recited—no doubt with rabbinic authority—his new *halakah* when applying Mosaic law:

הָאִישׁ מִכֶּם בְּלִי עֵזוֹן רָאשׁוֹן יִסְקַל עָלֶיהָ אָבֶן

“The sinless man of you – first let him cast a stone at her.”

‘Ο ἀναμάρτητος ὑμῶν πρῶτος ἐπ’ αὐτὴν βαλέτω λίθον.

Jesus’ second act of writing in 8:8 follows naturally as he shifted his attention away from the accusers to the accused woman and wrote something for her. This time it was probably **עַל-עַפָּר**, “concerning forgiveness.” (The *Vorlage* here may have had the phrase **כתב על עפר על עפר**, to be read as **כָּתַב עַל-עַפָּר עַל-עַפָּר**, “he wrote upon the dust about forgiveness.” If so the second **עַל עַפָּר** appeared to be a scribal dittography and was subsequently dropped.) Having written **עַל עַפָּר / עַל-עַפָּר** “concerning forgiveness,” Jesus stood and addressed the accused woman and told her of his forgiving her: “Nor do I condemn you.”

Jesus’ focus on forgiveness here reflects his agenda and priorities. In Matt 6:9, 12, 14–15 are these familiar words:

This, then, is how you should pray, . . . Forgive us our sins,  
just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us  
. . . . If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly  
Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others,  
your Father will not forgive your sins.

According to Luke 23:34 Jesus prayed: “Father, forgive them [his executioners]; for they know not what they do”; and in Luke 23:43 Jesus said to a forgiven malefactor, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise.”

## CONCLUSION

The question “What did Jesus write according to John 8: 6b–8?” can be answered only through speculation. The Greek texts offer few clues, but once a Hebrew *Vorlage* is created from the Greek texts, with all the ambiguous homographs of an unpointed Hebrew text, new clues present themselves. The

options are further enhanced when efforts are made to recover lost Hebrew lexemes by looking at Arabic cognates, a technique which has been practiced for centuries. The recovery of עֲפָרָה “forgiveness” and צִבְעָה “a religious decision / judgment,” as proposed in this study, has provided two lexemes that are contextually a perfect match. Thus, Jesus appears to have first written in the dust the words he spoke to the adulteress’ accusers in 8:6b, “Let him who is without sin . . . .” His second writing, focused on the adulteress herself, and dealt with forgiveness (עֲפָרָה) and her being forgiven. Once written Jesus verbalized his judgment: “Nor do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” He gave the adulteress’ accusers a new *halakah* “rule” for applying the Law,” and he gave the adulteress a new *halakah* “pathway” for living out her life.

### NOTES

1. K. H. Rengstorf (1964: 334–335) noted,

In the NT the only occurrence [of ἀναμάρτητος] is in the challenge of Jesus in the story of the woman taken in adultery: ὁ ἀναμάρτητος ὑμῶν πρῶτος ἐπ’ αὐτήν βαλέτω λίθον (Jn. 8:7). What is meant is very generally the one who is not burdened by any guilt; reference to God is the self evident presupposition. The history of the word gives us no grounds for taking it to mean those who are not guilty of sexual sin, i.e., adultery, after the pattern of a specific interpretation of ἀμαρτωλος in Lk. 7:37 and ἐπὶ ἀμαρτίᾳ in Jn 8:3 D (instead of ἐν μοιχείᾳ). Indeed, the context forbids this, for Jesus is dealing with the scribes and Pharisees, against whom the charge of adultery could hardly be leveled, and no other sexual sin seems to be in question. The best explanation of ἀναμάρτητος in this passage is thus the general but concrete ἄνευ ἀνομιᾶς of Ψ 58:4 [MT 59:5, בְּלִי־עוֹן].



2. Edward F. Hills (1984: 154) argued that the *Pericope de Adultera* was originally in the Fourth Gospel but was set aside out of moral prudery.

The facts of history indicate that during the early Christian centuries throughout the Church adultery was commonly regarded as such a serious sin that it could be forgiven, if at all, only after severe penance. For example, Cyprian (c. 250) says that certain bishops who preceded him in the province of North Africa "thought that reconciliation ought not to be given to adulterers and allowed to conjugal infidelity no place at all for repentance." Hence offence was taken at the story of the adulterous woman brought to Christ, because she seemed to have received pardon too easily. Such being the case, it is surely more reasonable to believe that this story was deleted from John's Gospel by over-zealous disciplinarians than to suppose that a narrative so contrary to the ascetic outlook of the early Christian Church was added to John's Gospel from some extra-canonical source. There would be a strong motive for deleting it but no motive at all for adding it, and the prejudice against it would make its insertion into the Gospel text very difficult.

Marlowe (2004) provided online a lengthy extract of Hills' defense of this pericope as being Johannine, which is available by clicking [here](#).

3. Brown (1966: 336) made the same point, noting that "the style is not Johannine either in vocabulary or grammar. Stylistically, the story is more Lucan than Johannine."

4. Click [here](#) to view the Peshitta of John 8:1-11 in the London Polyglot.

5. Note Num 19:4, where the Septuagint also lacks a word for the MT באֶצְבְּעוֹ "with his finger."

6. Others associate Jesus' writing with the handwriting on the wall in Daniel 5:24, or the "you shall be written on earth" in Jer 17:13," or the injunction in Exod 23:1b not to join hands with a wicked man. For other proposals, see Darrett, 1964: 16, note 3.

7. Darrett's choice focused on Exod 23:1b, אֲלֹתֶשֶׁת יָדְךָ, "do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness." Because the written רָשָׁע could be either רָשָׁע "a wicked person" or רָשָׁע "wickedness" (in the abstract), "[Jesus'] refusal to be a party to what may be an unrighteous decision merges imperceptibly with a warning to the questioners that their own activities must be justifiable, and that it is not sufficient that they or some of them saw her in the act of adultery" (1964: 21).

8. Compare the translation of John 8:6b–8 Isaac Salkinson and Christian D. Ginsburg:

וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲחַ יֵשׁוּעַ וַיִּתֵּן בְּאַצְבָּעוֹ עַל־הָאָרֶץ:  
 וְכַאֲשֶׁר הוֹסִיפוּ לִשְׁאֹל אֹתוֹ וַיִּקְּמוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו  
 מִי־בְכֶם נָקִי מֵעוֹן יְדֵה־בָּהּ אֲבָן רֵאשׁוֹנָה:  
 וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲחַ שְׁנֵית וַיִּתֵּן עוֹד עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

and the translation of Franz Delitzsch:

וַיִּכְפֹּף יֵשׁוּעַ לְמַטֵּה וַיִּתֵּן בְּאַצְבָּעוֹ עַל־הַקֶּרֶקֶע:  
 וַיְהִי כַאֲשֶׁר הוֹסִיפוּ לִשְׁאֹל אֹתוֹ וַיִּשְׂא אֶת־עֵינָיו  
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיוּם מִי בְכֶם חָף מִפְּשָׁע הוּא יְדֵה־בָּהּ  
 אֲבָן בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה: וַיִּכְפֹּף שְׁנֵית לְמַטֵּה וַיִּתֵּן עַל־הַקֶּרֶקֶע:

(Click here for the complete Salkinson-Ginsburg Hebrew New Testament; and here for the complete Franz Delitzsch Hebrew New Testament.)

9. See Jastrow 1259; KBS 998–999. **צבַע**, stem II, should not be confused with **צַבַע**, stem I, “to dye, to dip, to immerse,” the cognate of **صَبَغَ** (*ṣabaġa*), which is spelled with an **غ** (*ġayin*). Hava (1915: 388) and Wehr (1979: 586) noted that **صَبَغَ** (*ṣabaġa*) “he dyed, dipped, immersed” appears in the name of John the Baptist, **יוחנא הצבאע** (*yuhannā ʿalṣābiġ*).

10. Lane (1867: 944–945) noted that the synonym **דין** (*dīn*), the cognate of **דָּיַן** “to judge/judgment,” means “obedience without any restriction . . . obedience to, and the service of, God”; and the noun **דיאן** (*dayyān*) (= **דָּיַן**) means “a judge or governor . . . a manager, a conductor, or an orderer of [the] affairs of another.” Similarly, the synonym **מלה** (*millat*), the cognate of **מָלָה** “word, utterance” means “a way of belief and practice in respect of religion” (Lane 1893: 3023). Hava (1915: 388) cited also **תשבג** (*taṣabbig*) “to profess” and **שבגה** (*ṣabġat*) “a [religious] opinion.” The synonym **شريعة** (*ṣarīʿat*) has become the loanword *shariah* “(Islamic) religious law.”

11. See Chapter I, “Reptile Rations in Genesis 3:14 and Isaiah 65:25,” in my book *Clarifying Baffling Biblical Passages*, available online by clicking [HERE](#). There it is noted that **עפר**, stem III, is the cognate with Arabic **غفر** (*ġfr*), which Lane (1867: 842; 1877: 2274) defined as “[the **غفر** (*ġifr*) is] a certain **دويبة** (*duwaybbat*) [by which may be meant a small beast or creeping thing, or an insect]” i.e., a synonym of **دابة** (*dābbat*) about which Lane noted “The dim. [signifying *Any small animal that walks or creeps or crawls upon the earth, a small beast, a small reptile or creeping thing, a creeping insect, and any insect, and also a mollusk, . . .*] is **دويبة** (*duwaybbat*).”

12. This is in disagreement with Power (1921:54) who stated:

A number from examples from various Arabic authors . . . will show more clearly the signification of the action of Our Divine Lord. It should be noted that in all cases the writing is the mechanical action of tracing figures or letters on the ground, not the intellectual one of expressing thought by written words . . . .

Quite to the contrary, Lane (1865: 759) included in his definition of *خط* (*ḥaṭṭa*) “he made a marks/lines (on the ground or in the sand)” —which was used in divination and geomancy— the following: “You say also, when a man is meditating upon his affair, and considering what may be its issue, or result, *فلان يخطى في الارض* (*fulānu taḥuṭṭu fī ʿlʿarṣi*) ‘such a one makes lines, or marks, upon the ground’. . . see St. John’s Gospel, ch. viii. verses 6 and 8.]”

Lane referred the reader to the synonym *نكت* (*nakata*) (1893: 2846) where he noted,

*نكت الارض بقضيب* (*nakata ʿlʿarṣi biqaḍībi*) “he struck the ground with a stick, or with his finger, so that it made a mark, or marks, upon it, with its extremity; an action of one reflecting, or meditating, and anxious.” [Thus our Saviour seems to have done in the case of the woman taken in adultery: see S. John viii. 6 and 8.]