

“Writing on the Ground (Joh. 8, 6. 8).”

E. Power, *Biblica* 2 (1921): 54–57.

It is generally recognised by modern commentators on St. John’s Gospel that Our Lord, when asked by the Pharisees to decide what Punishment should be inflicted on the adulterous woman, signified by writing with his finger on the ground his unwillingness to accede to their request. The commentators (1) give no Semitic instances of this custom, though Lücke (2) shows that the action was known to the Greeks in classical times. Recently however in *The Expository Times* (July 1919 p. 475) M. Paul Humbert declared that Our Lords’ writing on the ground was the act of a conjurer. He tried to prove his point by referring to a use of the Arabic **كُتِبَ** “write” in this sense, and by quoting from the *Lisan-ul-‘Arab* an instance of writing with the hand on the ground to express deep thought from the poet Dhu Rumma. In a subsequent number of the same review (October p. 38) Professor Margoliouth showed that Humbert did not cite the *Lisan-ul-‘Arab* quite fairly, as the paragraph about the conjurer has no connection with the preceding observation on the sense of the phrase “ he wrote on the ground.” He gave moreover the instance from Kosegarten’s *Chrestomathy* already referred to. A number of examples from various Arabic authors given with their respective contexts 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, also that the writing is done with a rod or with the finger according as the person is standing or sitting on the ground.

(1) Except Von Haneberg, *Evang. nach Johannes*, p. 438, who cites instance from Kosegarten’s *Chrestomathy*.

(2) *Commentar* II, p. 168 sq.

1). Qasim, son of Ummayya, praising the generosity of his tribe, says: “When asked for gifts they do not write on the earth (لا ينكتون الارض) with their sticks in seeking for excuses” (1). The action here expresses the anxiety of the miserly and their unwillingness to bestow.

2) Abu Dahbal in a poem, describing his distressful preoccupation when alienated by busybodies from one to whom he was deeply attached, says: “ I write on the surface of the earth (اخطط في ظهر الحصين) as though I were a captive fearing death” (2). Both in the case of the distressed poet and the despairing prisoners the action expresses an anxious and distracted mood.

3). Ibrahim, son of Al-Mahdi, the singer, was once asked by his nephew, the Caliph Al-Mu^{ta}ṣim, to improvise and sing verses on a narcissus bouquet which the caliph held in his hand. “And he wrote on the ground (نكت في الارض) for a while with a stick he had in his hand and then recited . . .” (3). On another occasion Ibrahim thus introduces an improvisation he composed while riding. “And I wrote with my whip (نقرت) on my saddle and sang . . .” (4). In these cases the action designates the concentrated attention required for poetical composition.

4). A friend of the mad poet, Maǧnûn Laila, who lost his mind when the object of his affections had been married to another, “passed by him one day as he sat writing on the earth (يخط بالارض) and fiddling with stones. Saluting him he sat by him and proceeded to address him with words of counsel and consolation He, however, continued looking at him and playing with his hand as before, thinking deeply and immersed in his thoughts” (5). Another, who sought the poet in his solitude shortly before his death, says “I found him sitting on the sand on which he had been writing with his finger (اقبل يخط باصبعه)” (6). Here again the action expresses deep

anxiety and a distracted state of mind.

5.) Abdallah ibn Merwan, the last Umayyad Caliph, gives the

(1) *Beiträge zur Assyriologie*, VIII, 3, p. 21. There is a variant *ينقرون* (cf. 3 infra).

(2) *Kitab ul-Aġānī* VI p. 166 l. 17.

(3) L. c. IX p. 59, l. 21-22.

(4) L. c. IX p. 63, l. 19.

(5) L. c. II p. 7, l. 9-11.

(6) L. c. II p. 14, l. 26-29.

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following account, according to Ibn Khaldūn and Mas^cūdī, of an interview he had with the King of Nubia, when he fled to that country from the Abbasides. The obvious parallel between the pious Nubian and hypocritical Umayyads, on the one hand, and Our Lord and the Scribes and Pharisees, on the other, will excuse the length of the extract. As Mas^cūdī, our earliest authority, was well acquainted with Christian sacred literature, a dependence on St. John is possible, but scarcely probable.

I had been there some time”, says Abdallah, “when the king visited me and sat on the ground, though a valuable carpet had been spread out for him. ‘What prevents you’, said I, ‘from sitting on our couch?’ ‘I am a king’, he replied, ‘and it is the duty of every king to humble himself before the greatness of God, since it is God who exalted him’. Then he said to me: ‘Why do you drink wine which is forbidden you in your book?’ I replied: ‘Our slaves and our servants have done so’. ‘Why’, he repeated ‘do you let your beasts tread the growing corn underfoot when devastation is forbidden you in your book?’ I replied: ‘Our slaves and our servants have done so in their ignorance’. ‘Why’, he continued, ‘do you dress in brocade and gold and silk when it is forbidden you in your

book?’ I replied: ‘As the sovereignty was slipping from us we called in strangers to our aid, who adopted our religion and wore that dress in our despite’. He looked down, writing with his hand on the earth (ينكت بيده في الارض) and saying, ‘our slaves and our servants and strangers who adopted our religion’. Then he raised his head to me and said: ‘It is not as you have said, but you are a people who have held to be lawful that which God declared unlawful and have taken what was forbidden you and have acted unjustly when you had the power to do so and God has stripped you of your dignity and clothed you with ignominy for your sins and God’s vengeance on you has not yet reached its completion and I fear, if the punishment come upon you while you are in my territory, it will strike me as well as you. You have hospitality for only three days, so take the provisions you need and leave my country’’⁽¹⁾

6.) To these ancient instances we may add a modern one from Hail in Central Arabia registered by Palgrave (2). A sick man, while

(1) Ibn Khaldiin, *Prolégomènes Historiques*, éd. Quatrenère I, p. 373-4.

(2) *Voyage dans l’Arabie Centrale*, 1, 144.

awaiting his turn to see the doctor, occupied himself in tracing odd designs on the earth with the end of his stick.

A comparison of these parallels with the scene described by St. John would seem to show that Our Lord’s action, besides denoting unwillingness to give his enemies the legal decision they sought, might also signify indignation at their hypocrisy and anxious commiseration for the fallen woman. If it only signified his unwillingness to decide the question put to him, it is difficult to explain why he again wrote on the earth after having given his evasive reply. Moreover the

Semitic instances afford 'so fuller and clearer an illustration of the Saviour' s meaning than Lucke' s quotations from the Greek (') that they perhaps justify us in finding here another Semitism in St. John' s Gospel and a confirmation of the authenticity of the pericope about the adulterous woman. They show clearly, at all events, that this practice has nothing to do with conjuring.