

What Did Jesus Write on the Ground in the Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery?

⁶This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, **and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.** ⁷So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. ⁸And **again** he stooped down, **and wrote on the ground.** ⁹And they which heard *it*, being convicted by *their own* conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, *even* unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. – *John 8:6-9*

In John 8:1-11, Jesus is holding a quiet and peaceable “Bible study” when the religious leaders barge in and demand that he tell them what they ought to do with a woman they’ve caught “in the very act” of adultery (3-5). They know what the Law says, but they wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. But it was a trap. Rome had forbidden the Jews from putting anyone to death (Jn. 18:31-32). So if Jesus tells them to stone her, they’ll turn him over to the Romans with the hope they’ll put him to death for breaking Roman law. But if he says *not* to stone her, then they’ll accuse him of breaking the Mosaic Law, thus discrediting him as the Messiah.

But as they’re making their demands, and as though he hadn’t heard a word they’d said, Jesus stoops down and begins to write on the ground with his finger (6). He then rises – likely points to what he’s just written – and says, “**He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her**” (7). He then stoops and begins to write again, except this time he remains stooped until they all leave (8). The first time he rose it was to let them know that he had more to say. But this time, he remains stooped so as to suggest that the conversation is over: there’s no more to be said, only a decision remains. But what did he write on the ground? Before understanding *what* he wrote on the ground, perhaps it’s wiser to understand *why* he wrote.

Why Did Jesus Write on the Ground?

Jesus wrote on the ground because he’s God come in the flesh. At Mt. Sinai – some 1500 years earlier – God had wrote the Law with his finger onto *two* tablets of stone, but now Jesus is going to *twice* write the Law with his finger into stony ground (6). This is his subtle way of claiming to be God!

Ex. 31:18 (Dt. 9:10) And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, **two tables** of testimony, **tables of stone**, written with the **finger** of God.

And so the same God that came down from Heaven and wrote the Ten Commandments with his finger onto two tablets of stone is the same man who’s twice stooped over and wrote with his finger God’s Law on the ground! Same principle, different application. The Old Testament

was written as a pattern of things to come (Heb. 8:5). And in this instance, Jesus is illustrating the truths of what occurred on Mt. Sinai!

But there's another reason: Jesus is having the same problem as God did: the Jews are still trying to save themselves from their sins through the outward observance of the Law. They think that because they were born Jews... they think that because they were born as one of "God's chosen people..." that this earns them a free trip into Heaven. But God is trying to teach them that they've already broken the Law and they're in need of grace – and indeed they are, as will presently be demonstrated. This explains *why* he wrote on the ground, but *what* exactly did he write?

What Did Jesus Write on the Ground?

Since Jesus was asked what should be done with the woman according to the Mosaic Law, then only an answer from the Mosaic Law will do. And since it was a legal matter specifically concerning adultery, then when he stooped to write the first time, it's likely that he wrote the following.

Lev. 20:10 (Dt. 22:22) And the man that committeth adultery with *another* man's wife, *even he* that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer **and** the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

This is what they should do with a woman caught in adultery – put her *and* the man to death. But where's the man? If she was caught *in the very act*, then he was immediately present and should've been brought as well. But they didn't. It's therefore logical that Jesus reminded them of what the Law commanded. (Note: it's difficult to catch someone *in the very act*, but somehow they managed to do so! Remember, this was all devised as a trap!) Jesus then stands, and likely pointing to what he'd just written, says, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her."

Up until this point, the scribes and Pharisees had been so busy yelling that they failed to notice what he was doing (7...they continued asking him). They probably just thought he was doodling on the ground, stalling for time. But after he'd spoken, they quiet down and begin to take notice. Jesus then stoops and writes again.

Dt. 19:16 If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him *that which is* wrong;...¹⁸And the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, **behold**, *if* the witness *be* a false witness, *and* hath testified falsely against his brother; ¹⁹Then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you.

These men aren't false witnesses because she wasn't guilty, they're false witnesses because they didn't bring the man. And so Jesus is challenging them to bring the man. If they do, then he can properly answer the question. But if they do, his identity will be revealed. And since

this whole thing was a trap (6), then in all likelihood it's one of their own. So if they want to press the matter, they must bring the man thus revealing his identity; or, if they want to press the matter without bringing the man, then they must face the charge of being false witnesses. So wanting neither, they being to walk away. This leaves Jesus "alone" with the woman.¹ But though she's guilty of the sin, he can't judge her because the Law also said that there must be two or more witnesses (Dt. 19:15 etc.). But all the witnesses had left! So in this instance, the Law actually saved her!²

So is this what Jesus wrote on the ground? No one can dogmatically state with absolute certainty. But at the same, it would be a challenge to arrive at something more fitting than what's been presented here. Jesus was asked what should be done with the woman according to the Law, and so logic demands that he answered them according to the Law; specifically, adultery. And it's in stating the Law that the trap of the scribes and Pharisees was revealed. Remember, the purpose of the Law is to make us aware of sin (Rom. 3:20; 7:7 etc.). Convicted, the scribes and Pharisees, beginning with the eldest, began to leave (Jn. 16:7-11). And so whatever Jesus wrote on the ground, it must have come from the Mosaic Law and it had to have directly dealt with the sin of adultery. Because of this, it's this author's opinion that the first time that Jesus stooped and wrote that he quoted Lev. 20:10. The Law said to bring the man and the woman, but they hadn't. And so Jesus was essentially asking them, Where's the man? And since they failed to bring him, and since these were the "experts" in the Law, then Jesus discerned that it was all a trap. And in having exposed the situation for what it was, he then quoted Deut. 19:16-19. He did this not only to point out their sin, but to remind them of the consequences of their sin in being false witnesses, which would explain why they left. The tables had been turned!

Behold, he [the wicked] travaileth with iniquity, and hath conceived mischief, and brought forth falsehood. ¹⁵He made a pit, and digged it, **and is fallen into the ditch which he made.** ¹⁶His mischief shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate. – *Psalms 7:14-16*

¹ They weren't "all alone," the Bible study group was still there. Only the religious leaders left.

² She was guilty of the sin but couldn't face the death penalty because there was no man and there were no witnesses. So although she "beat the case," it doesn't mean she's off the hook. God knows she sinned, her sin has been made public, she may have a divorce to contend with, could have contracted a STD, become pregnant, etc.