

John 8:6—What Did Jesus Write?

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BIG SANDY, Texas—The apostle John seems to have loved puzzles.

In his gospel, he wrote about 153 fish being caught when Jesus fixed the disciples breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:11). Why the precise number?

Later, he wrote about the number 666 (Revelation 13:18). Bible cryptanalysts have had a field day for millennia with solutions aplenty, yet “the number of the beast” still defies a definitive decipherment. It has proven tougher to crack than the best hackerproof cyber encryption.

In John 8:1-11, we read the account of a woman caught in adultery and brought before Jesus by some scribes and Pharisees to trap Him. They quoted part of the law of Moses that stated such women were to be stoned and asked Him what He thought.

At that point, Jesus bent down and started to write with His finger on the ground. But the text doesn’t tell us what He wrote.

So what *did* He write?

The short answer is we just don’t know. The longer answer is that doesn’t stop us from speculating.

One possibility: In the law, both Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 refer to an adulteress . . . and an *adulterer*. After all, if the woman was indeed “caught in the act” as the scribes and Pharisees claimed (John 8:4), where was her partner in sin? Could Jesus have been writing out these Old Testament verses as possible indicators to them that He knew it was not a sincere question but a setup?

Another possibility: Jesus may have been harking back to Jeremiah 17:13: “LORD . . . all who reject you will be put to shame; those who forsake you will be inscribed in the dust, for they have rejected the source of living water, the LORD.”

Just prior to the incident under discussion, Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem to attend the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:10).

“On the last and greatest day of the festival Jesus stood and declared, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says, *Streams of living water shall flow from within him.*’ He was speaking of the Spirit that believers in him would later receive” (John 7:37-38).

Could it be that in the account in John 8 Jesus is referring to the fact that the scribes and Pharisees, in their conniving rejection of Him—clearly demonstrated by their coming up with a test designed to trip Him up—deserved to have their names inscribed in the dust? They were evidently not believers. They would not be receiving the Spirit.

Names inscribed in the dust, unlike names inscribed in the Book of Life, disappear. Quickly. And permanently.

In any event, it doesn’t appear the woman’s accusers read what He wrote. Or, if they did, perhaps their hardened hearts blinded them to the meaning of the message Jesus may have been trying to communicate to them.

In fact, John writes that they started leaving, the eldest first, when they *heard* what He said, not when they read what He wrote.

They disappeared, just like names written in the dust.

So did Jesus indeed write the passage from Jeremiah? Maybe. We have made the case, but we cannot claim it is conclusive.

The larger lesson, though, is beyond dispute. We don’t have to puzzle over it at all. Jesus forgave the woman and exhorted her to “sin no more.” And He does the same for us.