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The doodling of Jesus: A semiotic inquiry into the rhetoric of immediacy

> Writing and power never work separately, however complex the laws, the system, or the links of their collusion may be.
> Jacques Derrida (1979)

1 Introduction: A mysterious scribbling

The *Pericope Adulterae* (John 8:6 – 8) is one of the most famous, quoted, and studied passages in the Gospels. Here is the English translation of it in the New Revised Standard Version:

> [...] while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. [2] Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. [3] The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, [4] they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. [5] Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" [6] They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. [7] When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." [8] And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. [9] When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. [10] Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" [11] She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Reams of paper have been used to read this passage. Interpreters have analyzed every detail of it, focusing, in particular, on the following questions: 1) Why does Jesus write? 2) Why does he bend on the ground to write? 3) Why does he write on the ground? 4) Why does he write twice? 5) Why does he write before and after uttering the famous sentence? However, the question that most tormented interpreters is: "what does he write?"[1]

In this paper of mine I shall ponder this question in three steps: first, I shall dwell on those interpretations that read the passage with reference to some prac-

1 For a recent survey, see Knust and Wasserman (2010).

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tices of writing / non-writing in the Semitic world. These readings do not propose a philological but an anthropological connection: what does it mean, in the cultures of writing, bending down in order to write on the ground with one's finger? Second, I shall expose a rapid iconographic survey. Not only exegetes, indeed, but also visual artists interpret this episode. What is the meaning of the writing / non-writing of Jesus when it is narrated through images?

Third, I shall conclude by putting forward a new hypothesis about this passage: should we perhaps interpret the writing/non-writing of Jesus in the light of the dialectics between mediation and immediacy?

2 Towards an anthropology of scribbling

Already in 1833 – 4, in the three volumes of his *Kommentar über das Evangelium des Johannes*, the theologian and Biblical scholar Friedrich Lücke[2] pointed out the parallels between the writing of Jesus in John 6:6 – 8 and some texts of Greek antiquity in which the fact of tracing signs on the ground would configure "ein Spiel des Vertieftseins, Verlegenseins, oder der Langenweile, oder ein Zeichen der absichtlichen Nichtbeachtung und des Abweisens" (an act of preoccupation, embarrassment, or boredom, or a sign of deliberate inattention and dismissal) (Lücke 1833 – 1834: 234, 2 "Auslegung von Kap. 5 – 21"). For instance, in *The Acharnians*, the comedy that Aristophanes[3] put on stage in 425 BCE, during the Peloponnesian War, writing on the ground is presented as a manifestation of boredom and impatience with the inertia of parliamentary life. The comedy opens by the dejected monologue of Dicaeopolis who, alone in the assembly, is bored to death and starts scribbling on the ground:

> ἐγὼ δ᾽ ἀεὶ πρώτιστος εἰς ἐκκλησίαν
> νοστῶν κάθημαι: κᾆτ᾽ ἐπειδὰν ὦ μόνος,
> 30στένω κέχηνα σκορδινῶμαι πέρδομαι,
> ἀπορῶ γράφω παρατίλλομαι λογίζομαι,
> ἀποβλέπων ἐς τὸν ἀγρὸν εἰρήνης ἐρῶν,
> στυγῶν μὲν ἄστυ τὸν δ᾽ ἐμὸν δῆμον ποθῶν [...].[4]
> (*Ἀχαρνῆς*, 31)

2 Egeln, 24 July 1791—Göttingen, 14 February 1855.

3 Athens, ca. 450 BCE —ca. 385 BCE .

4 "As for myself, I do not fail to come here before all the rest, and now, finding myself alone, I groan, yawn, stretch, break wind, and know not what to do; I make sketches in the dust, pull out my loose hairs, muse, think of my fields, long for peace, curse town life and regret my dear country home"; Engl. trans. F.W. Hall and W.M. Geldart (1907).

Already Thomas Mitchell's 1820 verse English translation of the comedy would render "γράφω" with "I fall to tracing figures in the sand" (Mitchell 1820: 17);[5] William James Hickie's 1853 prose version would translate the same word with "scribble" (Aristophanes 1853). Later, in the 1905 Cambridge edition of the comedy, Charles E. Graves commented (line 31): "γράφω—scratch and scribble on the ground with my stick. Mitchell indeed takes γράφω to mean that Dicaeopolis begins to draw up a bill or speech; but the idea is rather fidgeting with impatience" (Aristophanes 1905). In the passage, then, "γράφω" can ambiguously refer to both the writing of the law, which should be the main occupation of the assembly in normal time, and to idle scribbling, to which Dicaeopolis is condemned by the assembly's inertia during the war.

In an article published in the second volume of *Biblica*, in 1922, the Jesuit Semitist E. Power, a doctor from the University of Saint-Joseph in Beirut, current Lebanon, drew a further parallel between Jesus's writing in John 8: 6–8 and some analogous Arab-Islamic contexts. In 1911, the German Semitist Friedrich Schulthess[6] had published as the volume 8, part 3 of the *Beiträge zur Assyriologie und Semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* some poetical fragments attributed to Umaiya ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, a pre-Islamic Arab prophetical polymath and poet, who was a contemporary of Mohammed and probably influenced his style.[7] Among these fragments, Power (1921: 55) quotes the one in which Qasim, son of Umayyah, praises the generosity of his tribe: "When asked for gifts they do not write on the earth (لاينكتون الارض, *la yankutun al'ard*) with their sticks in seeking for excuses."[8] The fragment associates the act of writing on the ground with a semantic connotation of embarrassment, already registered by Lücke (1833–1834) in his commentary. The postural topology of writing on the ground, indeed, implies averting one's eyes from those of the interlocutor, concentrating the gaze, instead, on following the movements of scribbling.

The same act of writing on the ground is mentioned several times in the *Kitāb al-aghānī* (*The Book of Songs*), an encyclopedic collection of poems and texts (comprising about 20 volumes in the 1927–38 modern Cairo edition), dating from the 10th century and attributed to the Persian literate Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī.[9] In one of these passages, the poet Abu Dahbal,[10] from the Quraiš

5 On Mitchell's translation see Venuti (1995: 77).

6 1868–1922.

7 Ta'if (Arabic: aṭ-Ṭā'if), ca. 630. The bibliography on Umayyah ibn Abī al-Ṣalt is vast; see Borg (1998).

8 Quoting from Umayyah ibn Abī al-Ṣalt (1911: 21).

9 Esfahan, 897—Baghdad, 967.

10 Abu Dahbal al-Gumahi, Mecca, ca. 640–715; see Krenkow (1910).

tribe, probably born shortly after the death of Muhammad and author of a *Diwan*, is afraid that some snoopers might interfere in his relation with a beloved person; he therefore utters the verse: "I write on the surface of the earth (اخطط في ظهر الحمير) as though I were a captive fearing death" (l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī 1927–1938, VI, 1: 17). That is a further semantic connotation of scribbling: neither boredom nor embarrassment, but disquietude. In all these kinetic configurations, though, the fact of staring at the meaningless signs traced on the ground exerts a sort of hypnotic effect, which results in deep engrossment. A contextual feature of the 10th-century Arabian urban architecture might have influenced this imaginary. Although Abu Dahbal, as well as the other poets of the Quraiš tribe, were essentially urban, non-nomadic poets, they must have lived in an environment in which the ground, both in the private space of houses and in the public space of streets, was usually soft, and therefore easily traceable, not covered by flagstones like in Roman or Greek cities.

In a subsequent passage of the same *Kitāb al-aghānī*, Ibrahim ibn Al-Mahdi, Abbasid prince, singer, composer and poet,[11] is asked by his nephew – the Caliph Al-Mu'tasim – [12] to improvise and sing verses on a narcissus bouquet that the caliph is holding in his hand. As Agnes Imhof (2013: 1) points it out in a paper on singing contests at Samarra, Al-Mahdi was a promoter of the then innovative 'Persian style' of singing, which "was characterized inter alia by redundant improvisation". In evoking this challenge to improvisation, the *Kitāb al-aghānī* tells the reader that Al-Mahdi "wrote on the ground (نكت في الأرض) for a while with a stick he had in his hand and then recited [...]" (l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī 1927–1938, II, 1: 9–11). A third pragmatic effect of idle scribbling on the ground emerges in this episode: following with one's gaze the meaningless traces in the sand encourages concentration before the difficult task of improvising. Already in 1933, Leiden Semitist Arent Jan Wensinck had proposed to read Jesus' writing in John 8:6–8 in the light of similar gestural dynamics in the Islamic world, suggesting the "seriousness of the situation" (Wensinck 1933).

The *Kitāb al-aghānī* mentions the scribbling on the ground also in a third and last passage, related to the Arab-Persian Romanesque epic *Layla and Majnun*,[13] which originated in Arabia before the 9th century and was later adapted by the 12th-century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi.[14] In this passage, a friend of

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11 779–839.

12 Abū Isḥāq Muḥammad ibn Hārūn al-Rashīd (796–5 January 842), better known as al-Muʿtaṣim bi'llāh ("he who seeks refuge in God"), was the eighth Abbasid caliph, ruling from 833 to his death in 842; see Bosworth (1993).

13 See Koudéline (2002).

14 1141 to 1209.

the mad poet, who had lost his mind when his beloved one went married to someone else, "passed by him one day as he sat writing on the earth (نكت الأرض) and fiddling with stones. The friend saluted him, sat by, and offered words of counsel and consolation. However, the poet continued scribbling as before, engrossed in his thoughts" (l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī 1927–1938, II, 1: 7). The episode attests another semantic implication of scribbling in Semitic antiquity: if in the previous passages doodling was a technique of temporary obnubilation, the poet of *Layla and Majnun* cannot snap out of the trance generated by the meaningless tracing on the ground.

The most intriguing Arabic mention of this writing/non-writing on the ground (on the earth, on sand) is to be found in Ibn Khaldun,[15] the most important scholar in the history of what is now Maghreb; precisely in the first book of the *Prolegomena* (*Al-Muqaddima*), the three-volume work that he wrote to introduce the first volume of his universal history, *Kitab al-Ibar* (literally, "collection of precepts"). The first part of the first volume of the *Prolegomena* (whose first two volumes were published in 1375 and 1378, whereas the third, "Egyptian" volume dates from later), reports an episode in which Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz,[16] aka Umar II, eighth Caliph of the Umayyad-Marwanids dynasty of Syria (717–20), summoned Abdallah, son of Marwan II,[17] the last Caliph of the Umayyad dynasty of Damascus, in order to have him report the dialogue that he had had with the King of Nubia, when Abdallah had found refuge at his court so as to flee the persecution of the Abbasids:

> I had spent there sometimes, Abdallah said, when the king came to visit me. He sat on the ground, although I had spread out a precious carpet for him to sit. – Why, did I enquire, don't you sit on an object that belongs to me? – I am king, he answered, and the duty of every king is to humble before the greatness of God, since it is to him that they owe their high rank. And yourselves, why do you drink wine, although your sacred book forbids that? I answered: – Our slaves and our servants are so fearless to do that. – Why, he continued, have you treaded on the harvest with the hooves of your mounts, although your book forbids you to do evil? – Our slaves and our servants have done that out of foolishness. – Why do you wear silk garments and golden ornaments, since that is forbidden to you by your book? At this question I answered: – Seeing that we were about to lose our sovereign authority, we called to our help some foreigners who had embraced Islam. They dressed in silk despite our will. The king bowed his head, started to trace some characters on the ground, and mumbled these words: – Our slaves! Our servants! Some foreigners who embrace Islam! Then he looked at me and said: – What you said to me is not correct; you are people who have despised the prohibitions of God; you have touched things

15 Tunis, 27 May 1332 –Cairo, 17 March 1406.
16 2 November 682 (26th Safar, 63 AH)—31 January 720.
17 Marwan ibn Muhammad ibn Marwan or Marwan II (691–6 August 750).

> whose usage was forbidden to you; you have been tyrants of your subjects. God stripped you of your power and clothed you with ignominy, because of your sins, and to your regard, the revenge of God will be limitless; I am also afraid that it will befall me while you are in my country. You know that hospitality lasts three days; make then your provisions and get out of my territories. (l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī 1927–1938, I, 1: 1321)[18]

A subtle semiotic analogy links the body and writing of Jesus as described in the Gospel of John and those of the King of Nubia in the dialogue reported by Ibn Khaldun. In both cases, the bowing down of the body and the tracing of some apparently meaningless signs on the ground allow the character to manifest a moral hierarchy, in which the substance of the law is affirmed in contrast with its mere appearance and against a caste of morally inferior interpreters (the scribes and the Pharisees in the Gospel, Abdallah and his court in Ibn Khaldun). As it is well known, although Nubia was entirely Arabized from the 14th century on, Christianity had been the predominant religion in the area since probably as early as the 4th century. When Abdallah meets the King of Nubia, he likely meets a Christian king, or at least a king who is familiar with the moral ideology of Christianity. Such ideology translates into a superposition of postural, proxemic, and kinetic codes, in which being in closer contact with the ground and scribbling on it convey the intention to deconstruct the moral hypocrisy of the written law. From this point of view, both passages, John and Ibn Khaldun, seem to intertextually refer to Daniel 5, where a mysterious writing, not traced by human hand, would condemn an abuse of power.[19] It is not excluded that Khaldun himself might have been influenced by John's Gospel. One of the sources of Khaldun, indeed, the *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems* [*Muruj al-dhahab*] by the 10th-century historian Al-Masudi,[20] relates the same episode.[21] Furthermore, paragraph 8, chapter 121 of the same work narrates, within a complex *myse en abime* of enunciations, the dialogue between Nawf and Ali, in which the cousin of Muhammad explicitly refers to Christians as to those for whom "this earth, God's handiwork, is a rich carpet, the dust a couch, water a perfumed drink. The Koran is their cloak and prayer their covering. They consider this world as but a loan and followed in the path marked out by Jesus, son of Mary, on whom be peace!" (Al-Masudi 1989: 308).

The series of semantic connotations of scribbling on the ground must therefore include also a sort of deconstructive pragmatics, which tends to de-natural-

18 Arabic text Cairo: Bulaq, 1857; trans. mine.

19 See Leone (2014).

20 Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Masʿūdī; Baghdad, 897—al-Fustat, 957. See Shboul (1979).

21 Al Masudi (1989: 25).

ize the law by choosing the ground as support for an apparently meaningless writing. By scribbling on the earth, the King of Nubia is implicitly affirming the hypocrisy of his guest's interpretation of the written law and the existence of a more natural, more authentic version of it.

3 Rhetorics of immediacy

By indicating a possible parallel between Jesus' writing on the ground in John's Gospel and similar instances in the Greek, Arab, and Islamic world, Lücke, Powell, Wensinck, and other Semitists are not pointing at a philological connection but rather at a semiotic similarity. They suggest the existence of a cross-cultural anthropological dynamics according to which, in those cultures where the religious law is encoded through writing, alternative or even deconstructive decoding of that same law often implies pointing at its arbitrariness by switching to 1) a supposedly 'more natural' surface of writing: the earth instead of papyrus, parchment, or paper; 2) a supposedly 'more natural' writing tool: the finger instead of a stylus, a quill, or a pen; and 3) a supposedly 'more natural' writing itself, in which the rigid schemes of the graphematic transcription of the law are replaced by personal, doodling traces.

More generally, to this reading one might add that, from the semiotic point of view, immediacy does not exist or, better, it exists only as result of a rhetoric of immediacy that selects and subverts certain aspects of the mainstream codes of mediation. That was the case in Jesus' morally revolutionary subversion of the Mosaic Law as it is the case in those present-day political movements that advocate more transparency and, as a consequence, dis-intermediation in the political arena. In both phenomena, a rhetorical effect of dis-intermediation and immediacy is created by rearranging the theater of communication, by stripping it of its customary furnishing, and by replacing it with a sort of minimalist alternative, bearing some stronger connotation of 'naturalness.' However, rhetorics of immediacy do not limit themselves to replace a previous theater of communication; they also offer an ideological vision of it, which tends to emphasize its arbitrariness exactly for the sake of extolling the spontaneity of its replacement. For instance, it would be anthropologically and maybe also historically naïve to believe that writing with one's finger on the ground is a 'more natural' option than writing with a stylus on papyrus. The idea that the latter is a sort of cultural regimentation of the former is probably more historically fanciful than the idea that the former is actually a reproduction of the latter with less effective means. As Gombrich (1999) has pointed it out in an amusing essay, doodling has always been influenced by the visual and artistic culture of its epoch.

Be as it may, semioticians must above all seek to understand whether some common features characterize the various rhetorics of disintermediation,[22] transparency, and immediacy, and whether these features are to be better arranged according to historical, cultural, or discursive patterns, or according to a combination of the three. In the course of human history, individuals and groups have acquired hierarchical status and power through codification and control over codification. They have created languages of mediation and simultaneously they have constructed a rhetoric suggesting their primacy or exclusivity in managing such mediation. Only an ideologically populist view of history, however, can neglect that hierarchical status and power can be acquired also by deconstructing these languages of mediation and by formulating some opposite rhetorics of immediacy, whose pragmatic force is necessarily parasitic in relation to the codes of mediation. In searching the semiotic rules of this dialectics, focusing on the specificities of each discursive arena is perhaps as or even less fundamental as singling out cross-discursive ideologies of immediacy and their semiotic manifestations.

It is difficult to determine regularities in this field, exactly because immediacy is constructed as a counterpart to the specificity of a codified mediation. Nevertheless, it is impossible to underestimate the importance of a rhetoric of the body combined with a rhetoric of techniques. Every time that a discourse of immediacy attempts to caricature and replace a discourse of mediation, it represents communication as re-centered on the body. Across cultures and epochs, presenting communication as stemming directly from the body, as opposed to communication stemming from an unanimated object, like a book, for instance, tends to emphasize the arbitrariness of the latter and simultaneously to extol the natural motivation of the former.[23] One could argue that much of the Pauline rhetorical opposition between the Jewish Law inscribed in stone and the Christian Law inscribed in the heart revolves around this figure of proximity of the bodily arena of communication. With the advent of Christianity, the stone of the Jewish law was rhetorically presented as much harder than before, and as a consequence the heart of the Christian law was depicted as much softer than before.

One might interpret according to this rhetorical logic the physicality of John 8:6 – 8, in which the Evangelist is very careful to note that Jesus bents down twice, as though searching – in the closer contact between the body, the surface,

22 In economics, "disintermediation" designates the removal of intermediaries from a supply chain, or "cutting out the middlemen"; metaphorically, it has come to indicate every phenomenon of removal of human intermediation from a social or cultural process of communication.
23 See the concept of logocentrism in Derrida's grammatology (Derrida 1967).

the tool, and the content of writing – for a more 'natural' law than that inscribed in the Jewish stone. But, perhaps with a provocation, one could interpret in the same way the relation between the German, distant, ethereal, mediated body of Pope Benedict XVI and the Argentinian, proximate, corporeal, and apparently immediate body of Pope Francis. Since the advent of Francis, Benedict has started to appear as even stiffer and intolerably codified in the memory of believers, whereas, exactly because of Benedict, Francis now looks incredibly warm and pleasantly relaxed. Only semiotically naïve interpreters, however, could believe that the communicative power that Benedict barely held in keeping faith to codifications was of an entirely different nature than the power that Francis now fully enjoys by deconstructing them. Immediacy is just as much a result of semiotic engineering as mediation is, yet individuals and groups tend to become blind to the latter after they are exposed for a long time to the rigid codifications of the former.

4 Depictions of immediacy

From this perspective, it is interesting to look at visual representations of John 8:6 – 8, which often propose an iconic exegesis of the passage in relation to the dialectics between immediacy and mediation. 17th-century Flemish painters are particularly keen on transforming Jesus' scribbling into a readable inscription. Gabriel Metsu[24] even produced a curious visual syneresis between the protagonist and the narrator: in his painting, dating from 1653, Jesus transcribes the whole passage of the Vulgate relating the episode of the adulterous woman (Figures 24a and 24b).

However, the particular visual composition of this painting could not be deciphered without reference to Jewish sources dealing with female adultery. Bamidbar, that is Numbers, 5:11 – 31 describes the ordeal of the bitter water, prescribed by Jewish Law for women who are suspected to have been adulterous. In particular, 5:23 reads: "Then the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness." The treatise known as *Sotah* [שוטה], the sixth of Nashim in the Babylonian Talmud, records the in-depth Jewish discussion on the details of the ordeal. Sotah 17b prescribes when, in what form, on what support, with what writing tool, etc. the accusations must be written. The Gemara insists that the document must be written in the form of a "book" (which is identified with a scroll):

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24 Gabriel Metsu (Leiden, 1629—Amsterdam, 24 October 1667).

Figure 24a. Gabriel Metsu, *Jesus Defending the Adulterous Woman,* 1653. 134 x 165 cm. Oil on canvas. Paris: Louvre. Photograph and reproduction permit "Federico Zeri" Foundation, University of Bologna.

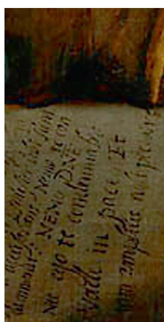


Figure 24b. Gabriel Metsu, *Jesus Defending the Adulterous Woman*, 1635. Detail. 134 x 165 cm. Oil on canvas. Paris: Louvre. Photograph and reproduction permit "Federico Zeri" Foundation, University of Bologna.

> Raba said: A scroll for a suspected woman which one wrote at night is invalid. What is the reason? An analogy is drawn between two passages where the word 'law' occurs: here it is written: And the priest shall execute upon her all this law, and elsewhere it is written: According to the tenor of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment. As judgment [could only be delivered] in the daytime, so a scroll for a suspected woman [could only be written] in the daytime. If he wrote the text not in its proper order, it is invalid; for it is written: And he shall write these curses – just as they are written [in the Scriptural text]. If he wrote it before she took the oath upon herself, it is invalid; as it is said: He shall cause her to swear and after that, He shall write. If he wrote it in the form of a letter, it is invalid – 'in a book' said the All-merciful. (Simon and Epstein 1960)

Read as an early Christian reaction to the *Sotah*, the *Pericope Adulterae* sounds like a sort of semi-symbolical subversion of it: whereas in Judaism the adulterous woman must be accused through the precise transcription of her charges in a scroll, and will be exonerated only if she will go through the ordeal of water mixed with the dust of the temple, Jesus scribbles on the dust of the temple an unreadable message that will exonerate the adulterous woman. It is only in relation to this early Christian rhetoric of immediacy that one can understand why Gabriel Metsu insists on placing a book in the hands of the temple's priest (Figure 24a).

5 Conclusions: The dialectics of Stone and Heart

The contraposition between Jewish mediated accusations and Christian immediate exoneration is even more evident among 17th-century Venetian painters, such as Pietro della Vecchia, in whose painting, dating from the third quarter of the 17th century and currently at the Louvre, Jesus literally pushes back with his left hand the massive in-folio of the accusations (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Pietro della Vecchia (Pietro Muttoni), *Christ and the adulterous woman,* third quarter of the 17th century. 126 x 172 cm. Oil on canvas. Paris: Louvre. Photograph and reproduction permit "Federico Zeri" Foundation, University of Bologna.

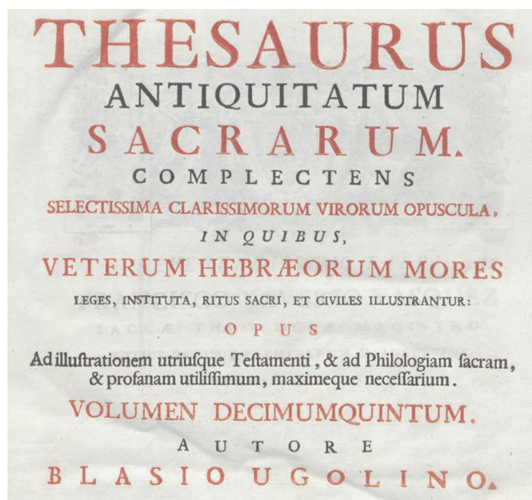
In a second version, recently auctioned by Christie's, the painter seems to have depicted the instant immediately preceding the rejection (Figure 26).

The contraposition between the left hand rejecting the Jewish mediation and the right hand pointing at the scribbled immediacy of the ground is even more evident in a third version, currently in a private Roman collection in Rome (Figure 27).

On the one hand, it is probable that these and analogous paintings refer to the Ambrosian exegesis of the *Pericope Adulterae*, which first proposed a parallel

Figure 26. Pietro della Vecchia, *Christ and the adulterous woman,* third quarter of the 17th century. 151 x 206 cm. Oil on canvas. London: sold at Christie's auction, 2000. Photograph and reproduction permit "Federico Zeri" Foundation, University of Bologna.

Figure 27. Pietro della Vecchia, *Christ and the adulterous woman*, third quarter of the 17th century. 33 x 45 cm. Oil on canvas. Rome: A. Sabatello. Photograph and reproduction permit "Federico Zeri" Foundation, University of Bologna.



THESAURUS
ANTIQUITATUM
SACRARUM.
COMPLECTENS
SELECTISSIMA CLARISSIMORUM VIRORUM OPUSCULA,
IN QUIBUS,
VETERUM HEBRÆORUM MORES
LEGES, INSTITUTA, RITUS SACRI, ET CIVILES ILLUSTRANTUR:
OPUS
Ad illuſtrationem utriuſque Teſtamenti, & ad Philologiam ſacram,
& profanam utiliſſimum, maximeque neceſſarium.
VOLUMEN DECIMUMQUINTUM.
AUTORE
BLASIO UGOLINO.

Figure 28. Biasio Ugolino. *Thesaurus Antiquitatum Sacrarum*, 34 vols. Venice: Apud Joannem Gabrielem Herthz, et Sebastianum Coletti, 1744–69. Photograph by the author.

with Exodus 31:18 (where the Decalogue too is written “with the finger of God”).[25] From this point of view, Jesus is depicted as the one who, with his finger, writes on the ground the new Christian law, replacing the old Jewish Law written by the finger of God.

On the other hand, though, it is important to underline that these 17th-century paintings were not executed in early Christianity, but in an era in which, in several European regions, for instance the Amsterdam of Gabriel Metsu or the Venice of Pietro della Vecchia, information on Jewish rituals was circulating often with apologetic or even overtly anti-Semitic agendas. The attention of 17th- and even more 18th-century Venetian painters to the visual contraposition between the Jewish scroll and the Christian scribbling, for example, is likely related to works such as Biasio Ugolino’s *Thesaurus Antiquitatum Sacrarum* (Figure 28), a monumental work in 34 volumes in which the author, a Jew who converted to Christianity, transcribed, translated, and commented on the entire Talmud for the sake of Christian apologetics. Pages 43–44 of volume 15, in particular, dwell at length on the role of writing in the Jewish ritual of the bitter water (Figure 29).

25 See Leone (2001).

סליק פיסקא

וכתב את האלות הכהן . שומע אני
כל אלות שבתורה תלמוד לומר האלה,
הכהן. למה נאמר שהיה בדין נאמר כאן
וכתב ונאמר להלן וכתב מה וכתב האמור
להלן כשר בכל אדם. אף וכתב האמור
כאן כשר בכל אדם תלמוד לומר הכהן,
בספר ומחה. בדבר הנמחה. והלא דברים
קל וחומר ומה להטיל שלום בין איש
לאשתו אמר המקום ספר שנכתב בקדושה
ימחה על המים. ספרי מינים שמטילים
איבה ושנאה וקנאה ועול דבבות על
אחת כמה וכמה שימחו מן העולם.
רבי ישמעאל אומר סיפרי מינים כיצד
הוא עושה קודר את האזכרות ושורף
את השאר. רבי עקיבא אומר שורף את
כולו מפני שלא נכתב בקדושה . מיכן
אמרו אין כותבים לא על הלוח ולא
על הנייר ולא על הדיפתרא ולא
במגילה שנאמר בספר ואינו כותב לא
בקומוס ולא בקנקנתום ולא בדיו שנאמר
ומחה אל מי המרים. מגיד הכתוב עושה
את המים מרים.

Finis textus.

E*T ſcribet maledictiones ſacerdos.* Crederem omnes maledictiones in lege memoratas? Idcirco dictum eſt. *Maledictionem. Sacerdos*; cur dictum eſt? Quia erat argumentum: Dictum eſt hic: *Et ſcribet*; & dictum eſt ibi: *Et ſcribet*: Sicut *& ſcribet* eo loco dictum legitime fieri poterat a quovis homine; ita pariter *& ſcribet* hoc loco dictum legitime fieri poterat a quovis homine. Idcirco dictum eſt: *Sacerdos*; *& delebit*; re qua poſſit deleri. Atqui eſt argumentum a minori ad majus. *Si* ad ſtatuendum pacem inter maritum & ejus uxorem dicit Deus; liber qui ſcriptus eſt in ſanctitate, deleatur aquis; libri hæreticorum qui adducunt inimicitiam, & odium, & zelotypiam, & perverſitatem ſimultatum, quanto magis delendi ſunt de mundo? R. Iſmael dicit: De libris hæreticorum quid faciendum eſt? Abſcindet nomina Divina memorata, & reliquum comburet. R. Akiba dicit: Comburet totum, quia non eſt ſcriptum cum ſanctitate. Hinc dixerunt. Non ſcribendum erat ſuper tabula, neque ſuper charta, neque ſuper pelle non præparata; Sed in volumine; Dictum eſt enim: *In libro*. Neque erat ſcribendum gummi, neque chalchantho, ſed atramento. Dictum eſt enim. *Et delebit in aquis amaris*. Scriptura, quæ poſſit deleri; Oſtendit textus, quod faceret aquas amaras.

Figure 29. Biasio Ugolino. *Thesaurus Antiquitatum Sacrarum*, 15: 43–4. Photograph by the author.

The complex dialectics through which Christianity shaped its identity in contraposition with Judaism also implied the shaping of a “rhetoric of immediacy” that was parasitic upon Jewish mediations at the same time that it caricatured these. The *Pericope Adulterae* can also be read as a powerful text of this rhetoric. It gave rise to an imaginary of immediacy that, many centuries later, would bring about the beautiful painting executed by Valentin de Boulogne in 1620 (Figure 30): here the scribbling of Jesus lies outside of the frame, and the responsibility of encoding its message is entirely attributed to the spectator, with a sublimely persuasive evocation of the supposed immediacy of the Christian law.

Figure 30. Valentin de Boulogne, *Jesus and the adulterous woman,* 1620. 167.6 x 219.7 cm. Oil on canvas. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum. Photograph and reproduction permit "Federico Zeri" Foundation, University of Bologna.

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