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Written with the *finger of God*
Delicious Bible sandwiches



*History is a story written by
the finger of God (C. S. Lewis)*

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"I like looking at the finger of God. Why it takes one and not another, why this one or that one, why now or why then. The finger of God is always on us. When you get older and you see your friends dying around you, you say "Why not me?" That machine is always there." (Christian Boltanski).

"The finger of God never leaves identical fingerprints." (Bill Vaughan).

Why Do We Have Fingerprints?

[Emma Bryce](#) asked this a few years ago. She noted that in 1910, Thomas Jennings fled a murder scene, but he left behind a perfect impression of his fingerprints in the drying paint of a railing, outside the house where he'd committed the crime. His fingerprints were the first to be used as evidence in a criminal investigation, and he was convicted of murder in 1911. Since then fingerprints have been used in forensic investigations.



Fingerprints are unique identity markers, but Emma wondered what biological purpose do they serve? Since then scientists have disagreed on the answer to this question. However, the theories guiding scientific research have been that fingerprints help improve grip, and touch perception.

Does God have fingers?

It sure seems like it. The expression '*the finger of God*' occurs in Exodus 8:19, 31:8 (which is repeated in Deuteronomy 9:10), and Luke 11:20. To these three we can add '*the fingers of a man's hand*' Daniel 5:5, which was sent from God, and '*wrote with his finger on the ground*' (twice John 8:6, 8), a reference to Jesus, Himself God. However, the '*finger of God*' is a metaphorical anthropomorphism, a literary device that gives human characteristics to non-human beings, such as God. But what does it mean? Let's see if we can figure it out.

In the first and last of these references (Exodus 8:19, John 8:6, 8), God's finger is written in the dust and so the two texts form a sandwich. Details next.

God's message in the dust

*Then the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt.'" And they did so; Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and gnats came on humans and animals alike; all the dust of the earth turned into gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt. The magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they could not. There were gnats on both humans and animals. And the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is *the finger of God*" But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said (Exodus 8:16-19).*



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God's message in the dust continued

Following the miraculous judgments of Moses' rod turned to snake, waters turned to blood, and frogs, God's fourth plague turned dust of the land to lice on man and beast. The lice infested the whole land of Egypt, and caused great discomfort and irritation. The Egyptian magicians tried in vain to reproduce the miracle but could not. They admitted to Pharaoh that this is *the finger of God*, but Pharaoh does not listen to them, and his heart is hardened.



Turning dust to gnats is no big deal for our God Who turned dust into Adam. Gnats or possibly mosquitoes, caused great discomfort and humiliation for the Egyptians. So, what's the message written by God's finger here?

By turning the dust of the earth into gnats, this plague challenged Geb, the Egyptian god of the earth at the core of his domain, as he was central to the ancient Egyptian creation myth of controlling the earth ([Rosicrucian](#)). God's sovereignty and power were no match for the Egyptian magicians.

Moreover, God delivered a message about His divine justice as He punished Pharaoh's defiant refusal to obey His command to let Israel go. So, this miracle showed the total superiority of God's power over Geb. And, as Israel left Egypt it caused them to ask, *Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?* Of course, the answer is 'none'.

Lord's message in the dust

The other text that forms the sandwich with the story above is John 8:6, 8. Here's the full text.

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. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.

Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test Him, so that they might have some charge (kategoros) to bring against Him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the earth.

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." And once again he bent down and wrote on the earth.

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. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are your they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and sin no more (John 8:2-11).

Practically all of the earliest and best extant manuscripts omit John 7:53-8:11. However, internal evidence may favour inclusion.

The story of the adulterous woman is bracketed on the one hand by the pilgrims and worshipers who attended the Feast of Tabernacles going home (7:53). On the other hand, the adulterous woman narrative is bracketed by Jesus' assertion that He is the Light of the world (8:12ff). This is the "dawning" of the Light of the world mentioned by Isaiah 9:2, symbolised by Jesus' return to the temple at "early dawn" (8:2). Here the adulterous woman came to "the light" while her accusers shrank away into the shadows (Net Bible translator's note).

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Lord's message in the dust continued

The Jewish leaders brought (*ago*) the woman, an action artificially directing her, indicating restriction of her free movement. This looks like coercion. The scribes and the Pharisees were pretending to be guardians of the law of Moses, and they came to test Jesus to determine if He was as zealous of Moses as they were. They tried to entrap Him, because if He said that she should be stoned, He would be charged with breaking Roman law. If He agreed with stoning, He would be charged with breaking Moses' law. To charge (*kategoros*) someone, is to apply a label that voids the subject of personal qualities, personal sovereignty, autonomy, dignity, liberty and ultimately life ([Abarim Publications](#)).

Their accusation that the woman was caught in adultery brought her under the Mosaic law that demanded:

1. Both man and woman were to be stoned (Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22-24). So, if she was caught in the act as she was accused, then the man needed to be brought to account as well. No man was brought on this occasion. In essence, the Jewish leaders bringing the charge broke the law.

2. The second law that the men broke was Deuteronomy 16:19-20. That commandment required no distortion of justice, or partiality. Justice, and only justice Israel was to pursue. But the leaders were partial in not bringing to Jesus the adulterous man, the second guilty party. Their motivation was not a thirst for justice but a thirst for the blood of Jesus.



So, the Lord stooped down to write on the ground, twice, for twice the leaders had broken the laws of the Mosaic code. The only other time that God wrote twice was the 10 Commandments. God inscribed them on stone that Moses carried down the mountain, and when he discovered that Israel had broken the first of those commandments, he hurled them down, breaking them to pieces. This act symbolised the nation's breaking of God's laws. In that God inscribed afresh the 10 on new stones symbolised that the Word of God cannot be broken.

The scribes and the Pharisees pressed Jesus if He would say anything differently to Moses. His reply was written in the dirt, possibly reminding them that they had broken the law by bring only one of the two parties. But they ignored what He wrote and continued to bombard Him with their demand that He answer their questions. In response, Jesus made a demand of His own: *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her*. He had made it clear that they had broken Moses' law in their partial administration of justice, and they were now powerless to throw the stones that they held in their hands.

For the second time Jesus wrote in the dirt, and the scribes and the Pharisees 'heard'. But Jesus didn't say anything, but they had the mental capacity to understand what He wrote, possibly about the law of impartial justice. The Lord has now exposed the error of their collective convictions, and in refuting their error He has put them to shame. From their own Mosaic law, the Lord calmly produced the evidence that contradicted their evil scheme to convict Him of doing the very things that they had done. In hindsight, they recognised that they fell into the trap that they had made for Him.

Consequently, those Jews who had come to Jesus, now go, one by one beginning with the elders, those holding pre-eminent rank until the last in the rank. None of the accusers is left, and Jesus says He doesn't condemn her either. Her acknowledgment of Him as sir, or Lord, recognising His inherent authority shows where heart is, and He demands that she go and sin no more.

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Lord's message in the dust continued

One final thing. Speaking of the Lord writing in the dirt, is it not also reminiscent of what Jeremiah said:

O hope of Israel! O Lord ! All who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn their backs on You will be **written in the dirt**, because they have forsaken You, Lord, the spring of living water (Jeremiah 17:13).

That says it all about the scribes and the Pharisees of John 8. They had abandoned the *hope of Israel* turned their backs on Him, and each of the woman's accusers saw Jesus write their own sins in the dirt. Knowing the Scriptures as they did, the Lord's allusion to Jeremiah must have hurt, and been terrible embarrassing.

Before moving on to the next text, let's now summarise the two finger-of-God-in-the-dust events, forming a bracket enclosing the rest of the references. The message for Egypt written in its dust storm communicated divine justice for Pharaoh's defiant refusal to obey God's command to let Israel go, and demonstrated the total supremacy of God's power over one of the gods of Egypt. Likewise, the Jewish leaders refusal to obey God's commandments written in the Mosaic code meant their sin was memorialised in the dirt as they turned their backs on Jesus, the Hope of Israel.

God's message on the tablets

*When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, **written with the finger of God** (Exodus 31:18).*

This text is sandwiched between two of the ten commandments located on the tablets. The first, a prohibition on sabbath breakers (Exodus 31:12-17), and the second, a prohibition on idolatry, and God's intention to consume Israel for their worship of the golden calf (Exodus 32:1-9).

*The Lord gave me the two stone tablets, **written with the finger of God**... the tablets of the covenant. And he said to me, "Get up, go down at once from here because your people whom you brought out of Egypt have sinned! They have quickly turned from the way I commanded them and have made for themselves a cast metal image." Moreover, he said to me, "I have taken note of these people; they are a stubborn lot! Stand aside and I will destroy them, obliterating their very name from memory, and I will make you into a stronger and more numerous nation" (Deuteronomy 9:10-10:5).*

Unlike the Exodus texts that came at the beginning of Israel's wilderness journey, this one comes at the end of Israel's wilderness journey as they are about to enter Canaan. In an extensive discourse, Moses relates the nation's idolatry at Sinai and their rebellion during the previous 40 years.

So, the expression, **written with the finger of God**, in these two texts occurs at the start and end of Israel's wilderness journey. Were they listening to the message that God had written? It seems not, as idolatry and rebellion were hallmarks of their lives in the promised land. Which is probably why the law was written with the finger of God on stone symbolising the hard-heartedness of Israel.

God's message on the wall

God interrupted King Belshazzar's boozy, and idolatrous party in Babylon, by sending the fingers of a man's hand to write on the plaster of the royal palace wall. This was **the finger of God** (Daniel 5:5, 24).

This startling imagery terrified and mesmerised the party goers, and for more than 2,000 years it has had the same impact on the readers of the story ([Ornstein](#)). How did it come about?



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God's message on the wall continued

Daniel and his three friends were part of an elite group of exiles forced into royal training to serve the Babylonian king. The four young men distinguished themselves with supernatural gifts of dream interpretation and intelligence, while maintaining their Jewish identities.

Like the exiles Joseph and, Esther, Daniel and his friends interpret the king's dreams of God-delivered personal and regime disaster, while also exhorting him to repent. His son, Belshazzar, who succeeded his father when he was banished, however, never got the message, until God sent him a terrifying hand-written note appearing on the palace wall as he partied with his nobles, consorts and concubines, while worshipping his gods.

At the same time, the exiled Jews had to watch his contemptuous act of drinking from the sacred temples vessels, using them to get drunk and to worship his gods of wood and stone. So, Israel's God, who had used the Babylonians to punish His wayward people for their sins, would suffer this idolatrous, pagan insult no longer. Accordingly, He sent His verdict in hand writing on the wall.

God has numbered your kingdom and brought it to an end; you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting; your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

Ornstein notes that Heschel made an astounding assessment of the message of the Hebrew prophets. He argued that the special ability of the prophets was not so much predicting the future, but rather 'the deep intuitive sense they had of the devastating effect that earthly injustice has on God's inner emotional life. As he put it, whoever imagines that God is unaffected by injustice by and to humans, is denying the very essence of religious faith. In this view, what caused prophets to shriek was a shattering and undeniable empathy with the suffering of the Creator'.

In this story, then, Daniel is a powerful model. While he rises to the top of the king's court, he is so well respected that the king calls upon his wisdom and counsel before all his nobility. Yet despite his position, Daniel doesn't waver from severely chastising Belshazzar for his awful wrong doing. Daniel serves the king, but he serves God and God's truth even more.

God's message to Satan

Finally, Jesus Christ asserted that *if He cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to (phthano) you* (Luke 11:20).

Phthano means to be ahead of, to overtake or gain ground on someone as in a race. So, the kingdom of God had overtaken them, which is explained by the Lord's short, simple story that appears in the following verses.

In His words, a strong man, fully armed, guards his own court around his main house, all his property is secure. How can the goods be taken? Only by overcoming the strong man, by proving that there is another stronger than he. Now the Lord had cast out a demon, and when the demon had gone, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed.

That is, Satan had been holding the afflicted person in his grasp; and the wasted life could be restored only by the might of Christ in the power of the Spirit of God coming upon him, and overcoming him, and taking from him his whole armour in which he trusted.

The message written by '*the finger of God*' here is that the overcoming and departure of the malignant spirit, and the restoration of the man, were the sign of the victory of the kingdom of God over the kingdom of Satan in the lives of people (11:18).

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Conclusion

The expression '*the finger of God*' reminds us that God writes messages to mankind on various palettes. In the first and last references in the Bible He wrote in the dust, from which humble beginnings man was made. And, what humiliation the two messages communicated! On the one hand, He is greater than all gods controlling nature and life. On the other, he shows how man so easily breaks His laws all the while pretending to be guardians of them.

Other palettes He chose were stone tablets forever memorialising the permanency of His word that cannot be broken. He also chose a clean plaster wall to send a message of immediate destruction to a pagan king that contemptuously treated God's people and His sacred things. That message disappeared as quickly as it came, as did the king, God's message endured.

One final palette was most abstract. He didn't write in the dust, or on stone, or on a wall, but in the realm of the unseen, in the spirit world by the Spirit of God. He overpowered a demon, and Satan, and while the writing was invisible, the outcome was clearly seen. The oppressed man was healed.

In sum, the finger of God writes His messages to men, demons, and Satan, and His word cannot be broken, but endures forever.

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