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Spring 2013

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Recommended Citation

Howard, Cameron B. R., "Exodus and the Authority of the Written Word" (2013). *Faculty Publications*. 99.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/99

Published Citation

Howard, Cameron B R. "Exodus and the Authority of the Written Word." *Word & World* 33, no. 2 (2013): 121–29.

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Exodus and the Authority of the Written Word

CAMERON B. R. HOWARD

Recent research on ancient literacy and the development of the Hebrew Bible has emphasized that biblical texts arose in a predominantly oral society.¹ Throughout ancient Israel the ability to read and write was the exception, not the norm, even at the latest stages of the Hebrew Bible's composition. Writing was considered mysterious, even magical, particularly to those who had no regular access to texts. Most texts had to be read aloud, either one-on-one or in community, to have a readership outside of the limited scribal class. Even postexilic texts like Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, and Esther, which show a much more pronounced interest in the authority of written documents, still have moments of deference to an oral mentality.² Susan Niditch has advocated for understanding the Hebrew Bible on a continuum of literacy and orality: "[It] is not that ancient Israelites knew little of writing, but rather that Israelite literacy in form and function is not to be

¹Representative works include David Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); William Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 97–98.

Thoughtful reading of Exodus involves recognizing that a predominantly oral culture lies behind the biblical text. Still, the book also records moments of writing—by both Moses and God. Through this covenantal sharing of reading and writing, God and humanity enter into a relationship of disparate power, but mutual responsibility.

confused with modern literacy and that ancient Israelite literacy has to be understood in the context of an oral-traditional culture.”³

The book of Exodus stands well within this oral world. Assumptions made about texts and textuality within the book primarily reflect what William Schniedewind has called the “numinous power of writing.”⁴ Orality tends to preserve an iconic or even supernatural status for written texts as objects, outside of what exactly is written on them. In other words, it is sometimes the idea *of* a text, rather than the ideas *in* a text, that holds the most authority in an oral culture.

In fact, even in the current, literate culture of American Christianity, elements of Exodus retain an iconic status apart from any textual analysis. Mentioning the Ten Commandments to any bystander is likely to conjure an image of those two tablets, rounded at the top and usually conjoined, that are so ubiquitous in Sunday School curricula or pop-culture references to the law of Moses. Hardly any picture of the Ten Commandments is more iconic than the movie poster for the re-release of Cecil B. DeMille’s film *The Ten Commandments*, with Charlton Heston atop the mountain, angrily hoisting the two tablets above his head, ready to throw them down toward the Israelites jubilantly dancing around the golden calf below.⁵ Those rounded-off rectangles are now yoked in the modern consciousness with Exodus, Moses, and law. We may not be able to recite all ten of the commandments themselves, but we have a good idea about how they are presented; they function symbolically as much as or more than they do textually.

In this essay I will survey the moments of writing within the book of Exodus, illustrating how writing in Exodus functions in ways distinct from our modern notion of composing texts to be read and interpreted. These “moments” of writing occur not just around the giving of the law, but also in unexpected places, such as in the wake of battle and in preparations for tabernacle worship. I will highlight three primary functions of writing within Exodus: as memory, as authority, and as ritual. Finally, I will reflect on ways these ideas about writing might inform our theological understandings of both Exodus and the Bible as a whole, thinking about reading and writing as one way of understanding God’s covenantal relationship with humanity.

WRITING IN EXODUS

The memory of Amalek

The story-world of Exodus is far more verbal than scribal, a circumstance that is particularly discernible in the first half of the book, which recounts the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. Pharaoh’s commands are spoken, not disseminated via written edicts. Proof of YHWH’s power is delivered via signs and

³Ibid., 99.

⁴Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 24.

⁵To view the image, go to: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:DeMilleTenCommandmentsDVDcover.jpg> (accessed February 7, 2013).

wonders, not written testimony or treatise. Moses shows no anxiety over literacy, only over his own orality; his addresses to the Hebrews and the Egyptians alike will require persuasive speech, not a written argument. Yet, even explicit references to writing or written documents in Exodus show that the stories within the book have been generated within a context where writing is an exceptional part of everyday life, not a norm.

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Proceeding sequentially through the book of Exodus, the first encounter with writing occurs in the wake of the wandering Israelites' battle with Amalek. Moses, with the help of Aaron and Hur, raises his hands throughout the battle, enabling Joshua and the Israelites to prevail against the Amalekites (Exod 17:8–13). "And YHWH said to Moses, 'Write this, a remembrance, in the book,'⁶ and put it in the ears of Joshua, for I will utterly wipe away the memory of Amalek from under the heavens" (17:14).⁷ The Hebrew word translated here as the "memory" (*zeker*) of Amalek, while sharing the root "to remember" (*zkr*) with the word translated as "remembrance" (*zikkaron*), carries the nuance of renown, the sense of a "good name." God's call to *write* requires Moses specifically to document a remembrance (*zikkaron*), because God will destroy any memory-born-of-fame (*zeker*) for Amalek.

God's directive has two parts, in a structure that rings of poetic parallelism: "write this" is paired with "put it in the ears" (i.e., recite). An oral mode of record keeping—passing word on to the next generation of Israelite leadership—is paired with the written. Both gestures seek to make permanent a particular version of the past, one in which all glorification of Amalek is lost, and the sustained memory of the Amalekites is their utter defeat. The irony, of course, is that by recording the admonition to eliminate every remembrance of Amalek's victorious reputation, the act of writing has made permanent that memory. Even so, Moses has been empowered to "rewrite" history, hoping to ensure that any memories of Amalek surviving into future generations will be only those that inscribe his defeat.⁸

Authorizing the law

At the giving of the stone tablets of the covenant, God is shown to be a writer, not just one who commands human beings to write. God's *magnum opus* within

⁶Any reference to a "book" (*sefer*) within quotations from the Bible should be understood to refer physically to a scroll, not a codex (i.e., bound book). For more on how the physical form of texts affects how they are edited, read, and interpreted, see van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 20–23.

⁷My translation. Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

⁸When the subject of the Amalekites is broached at Deut 25:19, God directs the Israelites to do the blotting out of Amalek's memory. No specific references to writing appear in this directive; however, overall the book of Deuteronomy assumes a much more literary/literate context than Exodus. See for example, Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 109.

the book of Exodus is “the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God” (Exod 31:18b). In the midst of the golden calf story of Exod 32, the tablets are described in more detail: “tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets” (Exod 32:15b–16). With God’s finger as the writing instrument, there is no mediation between God’s self and the written text: no ink to brush, no stylus to press into clay, no sharp edge to scrape the rock, just the marks of God on the stone. The writing on the tablet is an extension of God’s very self, a circumstance that lends the writing both authority and mystery. Even though Moses remains the bearer of the tablets, the tablets themselves hold God’s own words, written by God, ostensibly accessible to any who might be able to read them. This circumstance is distinctly different from the oral delivery of the law, wherein Moses is the mediator *par excellence*, and no one else can approach God to receive God’s direct words. Yet, whereas in our literate culture the notion of a written text might imply more accessibility, reading, as we have seen, was not a widely possessed skill in the oral culture reflected in the book of Exodus. Thus, the tablets retain a sense of mystery and distance from the people, even as they represent the supreme authority of the deity, marked as they are by God’s finger.

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Though these two stone tablets are generally associated with the Ten Commandments, a closer look at the book of Exodus shows that exactly which legal texts are written on those tablets of the covenant is unclear. Moses is first said to write down “all the words of the LORD” immediately after he has recited the laws—ostensibly inclusive of Exodus 20–23—to the people (Exod 24:3–4). The people verbally assent to being bound by the law, and then Moses performs a sacrificial ritual that serves as the “ratification” of the covenant: Moses dashes blood on the altar, reads the book of the covenant and again receives the verbal assent of the people, then dashes blood on the people themselves. The book of the covenant is thus used ritually to mark the formal relationship between God and the people. It is only after this ratification ceremony that Moses receives from God “the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction” (24:12b). To what, then, do “the law and the commandment” refer: the laws in the book of the covenant given prior to the covenant ratification ceremony or the instructions for building and appointing the tabernacle that follow in chapters 25–31?

While there is precedent from ancient Near Eastern treaties to have written copies of covenants available to the parties involved, that explanation still does not address the precise relationship between the content of the laws in Exodus and the

text written on the tablets. Speaking literarily, we might say that Exod 31:18 acts with Exod 24:12 to form an *inclusio* around the tabernacle instructions. That is, those two mentions of the tablets frame the instructions, providing an introduction and conclusion to the material in the middle. Thus, the structure of the narrative implies that the tablets described in Exodus contain the tabernacle instructions. In his analysis of Exodus, William Schniedewind affirms this perspective, pointing out, “The movie vision of Moses with the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets is a product of the Book of Deuteronomy.”⁹ At Deut 5:22, immediately after the laws have been listed, Moses declares, “These words the LORD spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets, and gave them to me.” Deuteronomy’s version of the Decalogue affirms that God’s handwriting marks the tablets, just as Exod 24:12 and 31:18 claim. However, whereas the Deuteronomy tablets clearly contain the Ten Commandments, the exact words of the tablets in Exodus remain ambiguous. In Exodus, the *fact* of the tablets, rather than their precise words and interpretation, takes center stage. Their authority lies primarily in their divine provenance.

Exodus, of course, does not describe only one set of tablets. Having gone up Mount Sinai to receive the law, Moses descends to find the Israelites partying around an idol, the golden calf: “As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain” (Exod 32:19). If writing the tablets was intended to provide a sense of permanence to the law, then that that function was not well matched to the stone medium! The shattering of the tablets is a dramatic gesture that does, however, grandly underscore the sense of authority associated with that writing. While Moses has been on the mountain, the people have been busy rejecting the authority of God by worshiping a calf, under the declaration, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Exod 32:8) The memory of their deliverance and the one responsible for it has not yet been inscribed on their hearts, and the laws to which they have acceded at 24:3—no matter which corpus of laws that ceremony represents—have been rejected. The broken tablets thereby symbolize the people’s spurning of God’s authority. If we understand the Decalogue of Exod 20 to have been on the tablets, then the symbolism is even more acute: the memory that “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod 20:2) has been fractured at the base of Sinai.

The destroyed tablets do not mean the end of the relationship between God and the people of Israel. After the meting out of both punishment and mercy, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write

⁹Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 134. See Schniedewind’s analysis for additional detail, particularly with regard to how the differences within Exodus and between Exodus and Deuteronomy may help clarify the composition history of the Pentateuch.

on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke” (Exod 34:1). Again there is ambiguity about which “words” are being referred to, as the covenant text following in Exod 34:10–26 contains what is often called the “ritual Decalogue”: a new set of regulations that address worship practices. In another departure from earlier portions of Exodus, Moses is instructed to cut these tablets, whereas at Exod 32:16, “The tablets were the work of God.” In both cases, however, God writes on the tablets. While many inconsistencies regarding the tablets can be attributed to the combining of multiple sources in the composition of the book, it seems that the tablets were most compelling to the redactor in their existence as symbol of the covenantal law that bound together God and the people.

God’s book

When Moses petitions God to forgive the Israelites after the golden calf incident (Exod 32), Moses appears willing to forego his own eternal remembrance for their sake: “But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written” (32:32). The Lord’s response—“Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book” (v. 33)—affirms that in this incidence of writing, God is neither novelist nor legislator, but rather record keeper.¹⁰ References to God’s book or the “book of life” are more frequent in postexilic texts, where the impulse toward bureaucratic record keeping in the Hebrew Bible is most pronounced.¹¹ Yet even in those later texts, which are farther along toward the “literacy” end of the orality-literacy continuum, God’s book is not a text to be interpreted. Instead, it is a supernatural repository of names of those who will live, either in this life or eternally.¹² Erasure from the book signifies death, just as being written in it signifies life.¹³ This function of writing is memorial, perhaps, but it certainly also functions as authority. God has power to amend the written record, but also, once written, the book is independently authoritative. The effect is akin to today’s voter registration rolls, where finding one’s name on the list means being authorized to vote. There are processes for getting onto and off of the rolls, but on the day of reckoning, it is the list that counts. The “book of life” is at once an extension of God’s authority and independent from it.

Ritual reminders

Just as the book of Exodus understands God to be a writer, the book also describes God as a reader. This identity for God emerges in the instructions for the building of the tabernacle given at Exod 25–31. Aaron is directed to wear select

¹⁰Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 81

¹¹See *ibid.*, 89–98; Cameron Howard, “Writing Yehud: Textuality and Power in the Persian Empire” (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 2010). Ezra-Nehemiah, for instance, is full of letters, genealogies, lists, and other records woven into the fabric of the narrative, such that the book itself is a veritable archive of other texts.

¹²This tradition is in line with Mesopotamian practices; see William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) 564–565; Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 81–82; Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 24–34.

¹³Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 33–34.

written words on his liturgical vestments. Two onyx stones are to be engraved with the names of the sons of Israel, six names on each stone, and the stones are to be affixed to the shoulder of Aaron's ephod (Exod 28:9–12). These stones are called "stones of remembrance," and "Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance" (28:12b). In addition, twelve stones, each inscribed with the name of one of the twelve tribes, are to be set into Aaron's breastpiece, called the "breastpiece of judgment," with the Urim and Thummim: "So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place, for a continual remembrance before the LORD. In the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart when he goes in before the LORD; thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the Israelites on his heart before the LORD continually" (Exod 28:29–30). Both of these engravings of the names of the tribes of Israel function generally as memory, though it is not unambiguously clear *who* is doing the remembering. The stones of the tribes make Aaron remember whom he represents, perhaps, but they also remind God of the tribes.¹⁴ In the case of the breastpiece, the presence of the Urim and Thummim with the stones indicates divination, a means of discerning God's will. By wearing these engraved elements, these physical representations of the sons of Israel, Aaron engages God's memory and God's will. The very wearing of the vestments is a ritual act that enables the encounter with God in worship.¹⁵ Memory and ritual are interwoven.

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In the bearing of names on his vestments—in that remembering—Aaron helps to facilitate the encounter with God sought in tabernacle worship. The same sense of ritualized remembering inheres in the engraved rosette, reading "Holy to the LORD," fastened to the front of Aaron's turban: "It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donations; it shall always be on his forehead, in order that they may find favor before the LORD" (28:38). Menahem Haran contrasts the stones on the ephod with the rosette on the turban in this way: the "presence [of the words 'holy to the LORD'] on the diadem is evidently due to the fact that the diadem serves as a symbol of all the holy gift-offerings. This also explains the difference between it and the ephod and breastpiece: the stones remind Yahweh of the tribes of Israel, whereas the diadem symbolizes in his presence 'all their holy gifts.'"¹⁶

¹⁴Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 213.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 215. See also Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 524–525.

Thus, these little bits of text function as ritualized reminders in tabernacle (and temple) worship. God reads the names of the tribes, and God reads the declaration of holiness; therein God is reminded of God's relationship with the tribes and of the worthiness of their sacrifices. Given the danger in the encounter with God that Exodus describes elsewhere (e.g., Exod 33:20), these written reminders also seem to serve a protective function for Aaron, reminding the deity of Aaron's identity and worth.

READING AND WRITING

American Christians today are members of a literate age, in which the ability to read and write is assumed and written texts are ubiquitous. Even so, in our world today the Bible as a whole faces a dual identity as both text and symbol. Sometimes we are concerned with the ideas *in* the Bible, but at other times we are more concerned with the idea *of* the Bible. To claim that one's faith is "biblical," or to say that one "believes in" the Bible, can serve as cultural code-language acknowledging the Bible as ultimately authoritative, yet with little accountability for articulating the nature of that authority, nor for engaging the content of biblical texts themselves. As this survey of writing in Exodus has shown, there are biblical precedents for understanding a written text as symbolic: precedents for allowing the mere existence of a text to point to something beyond the text, rather than for the words conveyed in the text itself to be the center of attention. In today's world, if mere mention of the Bible can evoke religious fidelity and fervor, does it matter at all what the Bible actually says? Put differently, if Christians can't agree on how to read the Bible, might it be enough to affirm the symbolic authority of the Bible, independent of its content?

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The answer to the latter question must be a resounding no. Ultimately writing is not self-actualizing; in order to function in fullness, it must be read. In her reflections on writing in the book of Esther, Mieke Bal articulates how reading is the necessary partner to writing: "It is not enough, for writing to reach its destiny, that it be written in the presence of its intended reader; it must be actually read in order to accede to its full deployment *as* writing. Without the act of reading, writing remains a dead letter. In other words, the reader is the subject of writing, responsible for its consequences, for the production of reality it designs."¹⁷ Once

¹⁷Mieke Bal, "Lots of Writing," *Semeia* 54 (1992) 94.

released into a world of readers, for the Bible to “accede to its full deployment” it must be read. This reading may happen in oral, symbolic modes, such as within the liturgy of a worship service, but it must also happen in study and prayer, alone and in community. To participate in a “religion of the book”—and particularly to stand in Protestant Christianity’s tradition of *sola Scriptura*—is not to revere a physical book apart from its content, but rather to seek to live by the words and meanings of the text, whether that text be packaged as a scroll or an e-book, leather-bound or hyperlinked. Reading is not just about deciphering words on the page, but about engaging ideas, wrestling with paradoxes, and seeking out an encounter with God.

That careful, thoughtful, faithful reading involves, in part, recognizing that a predominantly oral culture lies behind the biblical text. Such an understanding helps us twenty-first-century readers recognize the gap between our own assumptions about the authority of the written word and those of the Bible’s authors, its earliest readers, and even the characters portrayed in the text. Oral modes of the transmission of stories and traditions allow more easily for multiple versions of an account to exist simultaneously. “Authorship”—the notion of a single individual’s original work at one discrete moment in time—gives way to associations of ideas with a particular figure, whether he or she actually wrote those texts down or not: the “Psalms of David,” for example, forever belong to David, even if he did not compose them.

Attention to the functions of writing in Exodus in particular also serves an important theological purpose, in that it highlights God’s roles as both writer and reader. God the writer is lawgiver, judge, and record keeper; God demands our obedience and exhibits sovereign authority over us and all of creation. Yet, God the reader allows for reciprocity in God’s relationship with humanity. Our writing and God’s reading facilitate our shared relationship. This is in essence the nature of covenant itself: God and humanity enter into a relationship of disparate power, but mutual responsibility. Reading and writing thus provide appropriate ciphers for that relationship. Of the three primary functions of writing in Exodus—memory, authority, ritual—it is ritual that most closely resembles the way the Bible functions for us today. The Bible also reminds us of the past and symbolizes God’s authority over our lives, but those functions are not static, and Scripture is not magic. This writing, this book, helps to facilitate our encounter with God, not by its mere presence, but by our active engagement with its words and ideas. In order to be “living word” rather than “dead letter,” the good book will always need good readers. ⊕

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