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DEAD SEA DISCOVERIES 28 (2021) 275–282

Dead Sea
Discoveriesbrill.com/dsd

Formation of the Subject—Essays in Honor of Carol Newsom’s 70th Birthday

Introduction

Arjen Bakker | ORCID: 0000-0001-7781-0296

University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

a.f.bakker@rug.nl

Jutta Jokiranta | ORCID: 0000-0001-5842-6432

Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

jutta.jokiranta@helsinki.fi

Hindy Najman | ORCID: 0000-0002-9834-0534

University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

hindy.najman@riel.ox.ac.uk

This thematic issue of *Dead Sea Discoveries* addresses a fundamental issue in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, namely, the formation of the subject. Must there be a subject at all? Or is it, in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s words, “A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar”? The subject is *that which can ascribe predicates to itself but is not itself predicable of anything else*. Through such grammatical characterization, one might seek to give as neutral and as broad as possible an account of what has been conceptualized as the rational soul, the self, the mind, the agent, etc. This philosophical conception can be sharpened by philological, historical and anthropological questions: how does the subject change from one culture to another through translation, and from one period to another through commentary?

Philosophers and cultural historians have pointed out that the new scientific worldview that emerged in the early modern period was accompanied by a new understanding of the human self, or the subject. This notion of a rational subject that is entirely separate from physical matter finds expression in René Descartes’s “discovery” of the thinking “I” in his *Meditations* (1641). Shortly after Descartes, we find the first explicit formulation of a self-reflexive subject in John Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690). In the 20th century, the philosopher Charles Taylor argues that the subject has come to be identified

with modernity.¹ While Taylor acknowledges the crystallizing contribution of Locke and others such as Descartes, he claims that this modern self can already be traced back to Greco-Roman antiquity, especially to Augustine's transformation of platonic philosophy. Others however, have pointed out that the sources of the self cannot be restricted to the Greco-Roman world. Bernd Janowski and Carol Newsom have demonstrated that parallel trajectories of an introspective self are visible in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Judaism.² The essays in this volume by Carol Newsom, Ingrid Lilly, Friedhelm Hartenstein, Phillip Lasater, David Lambert, and Ishay Rosen-Zvi are all in this sense further expressions of this claim that the discourse on the ancient sources of the self would benefit considerably from integrating Ancient Judaism (by which we intend to include the Hebrew Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and more generally ancient Jewish texts).

This issue of *Dead Sea Discoveries* is devoted to considering the deepening and transformative ways in which the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ancient Judaism more generally can contribute to this discussion. This is not the first proposal of this kind to argue for a Jewish contribution to subject formation. To be sure, the topic of the self has been addressed in the study of Judaism. Scholars have identified ascetic practices in ancient Judaism,³ or have shown that within rabbinic literature we can observe practices that aim at transforming the self through pedagogy and intensive Torah-study, practices that are congenial to Pierre Hadot's spiritual exercises,⁴ or to Foucault's care of the self.⁵ The interiorization of the self has also been explored in rabbinic sources, and it has been argued that the Rabbi's responded to a cultural tenet of late antiquity to emphasize the inner self that was particularly prominent among Stoic philosophers.⁶ But this hypothesis was met with serious criticism because the comparison glossed over significant differences in the ways in which the subject is presented in late antique philosophy and in Rabbinic halakhah.⁷

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has opened up significant new possibilities for understanding the ways in which selfhood was conceived in ancient Judaism. Jewish groups in Palestine were clearly responding to cultural developments in the broader Mediterranean world and a Jewish *koine* of liturgi-

1 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

2 Janowski, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments*; Newsom, "Sin Consciousness."

3 Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism."

4 Schofer, "Spiritual Exercises in Rabbinic Culture."

5 Satlow, "'And on the Earth You Shall Sleep.'"

6 Levinson, "From Narrative Practice to Cultural Poetics"; Balberg, *Purity, Body and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature*.

7 Rosen-Zvi, "The Mishnaic Mental Revolution."

cal and interpretive practices can be discerned across regional and linguistic boundaries. Previous generations of scholars recognized the influence of Greek philosophy primarily in Jewish authors from the diaspora who wrote in Greek, such as Philo of Alexandria, while the engagement with philosophical ideas of Hebrew authors from Palestine was controversial. But the Dead Sea Scrolls have demonstrated that similar ideas developed across the Mediterranean world in the last centuries before the common era, in Athens and in Alexandria, in Rome and in Jerusalem.⁸ What Pierre Hadot has identified as the spiritual exercises of Greco-Roman philosophy,⁹ was also an integral part of Judaism. Indeed we encounter Jewish communities that have retreated from society to devote themselves to contemplation and *askesis*, both in Egypt and in Judea.¹⁰ This implies that the impact of late antique Christianity on self-formation cannot be properly understood without also considering processes that were already in place from the second century BCE (or perhaps even earlier), that is at least two centuries prior to the emergence of Christianity.

In recent years groundbreaking work has been done.¹¹ New contributions have demonstrated how the notion that humanity was created in the divine image lies at the source of perfectionist aspirations that are clearly visible from the priestly legislation in the Pentateuch through Philo's philosophical interpretations and Hebrew wisdom writings from Qumran.¹² Others have discerned indigenous models of agency and distinctive patterns of self-formation in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple literature,¹³ have explored the role of physical posture and embodied cognition in the liturgical formation of the self,¹⁴ and have highlighted how practices of continuous study and meditation that emulate celestial beings are functioning as ascetic performances.¹⁵

In order to achieve the integration of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ancient Judaism into this larger discourse, it is essential that we as scholars permit ourselves to engage a broad variety of ways of thinking about selfhood and subjecthood, from Philosophy to History, from Literature to Cognitive Science. Within the Humanities we want to acknowledge important work in Classics,¹⁶ Early

8 Najman and Reinhardt, "Exemplarity and Its Discontents."

9 Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*; Davidson, "Introduction."

10 Najman, "Philosophical Contemplation"; idem, *Past Renewals*.

11 E.g., see the recent volume: Niehoff and Levinson, eds., *Self, Self-Fashioning and Individuality in Late Antiquity*.

12 Najman, "Imitatio Dei and the Formation of the Subject in Ancient Judaism."

13 Newsom, "Models of the Moral Self"; idem, "Sin Consciousness"; idem, *The Spirit within Me*.

14 Newman, "Embodied Techniques"; idem, *Before the Bible*.

15 Bakker, "Sages and Saints"; idem, *The Secret of Time*.

16 Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject*.

Modern History,¹⁷ and Philosophy.¹⁸ In our own field, the work of Janowski and Newsom has been transformative.

Can we read our texts from antiquity so as to bridge questions that engage both the Humanities and Social Sciences? Since the emergence of social sciences, there have been various attempts to find a midway between social determinism and autonomous freedom. Social sciences lean more towards the first, and the concept that is often offered to represent the latter is agency, but agency is often a loose, ill-defined concept.¹⁹ At the same time, the problem is age-old, and attempts to place the human subject between various dichotomies (e.g., structuralism and individualism, essentialism and constructivism, nature and nurture) have received various *relational* propositions in religions and philosophies over time.

Cognitive sciences have their own take on the self. Cognition is anything that helps the organism to navigate in the world, e.g., the ability to anticipate, process, and make use of information in a certain environment.²⁰ A growing approach is known as 4E cognition: cognition is embodied, embedded, extended, and enacted.²¹ Simply put, “thinking is not computing in the brain but action with the body in the world.”²² The 4E approach to cognition challenges the biology-culture divide. From this perspective, culture is a giant web of cognition. “Human minds are deeply enculturated in cognitive networks. These networks help each individual mind gain control over his or her life and functions, but, at the same time, these networks also have a great deal of control over each individual mind.”²³ It also challenges the mind–body divide: there is no separate mind irrespective of one’s body; even language is deeply embedded in human bodily and sensory experiences.

The embedded and enacted view of the self fits well with the present issue’s enterprise to historically contextualize the subject and to understand the variations in conceptualizations that various historical agents have produced when

17 Sluhovsky, *Becoming a New Self*.

18 Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*; idem, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*; idem, *Cities of Words*.

19 See Barandiaran et al., “Defining Agency,” for suggesting three requirements for agency, Individuality, Asymmetry, and Normativity: An agent must be “a distinguishable entity that is different from its environment ... doing something by itself in that environment, ... and it does so according to a certain goal or norm” (369). In this definition, also bacteria are agents.

20 Cf. Bayne et al., “What Is Cognition?”

21 Bruin et al., *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*.

22 Cook, “4E Cognition and the Humanities,” 876.

23 Geertz, “Brain, Body and Culture,” 312.

navigating and adapting to different contexts (historical settings, languages, groups, personal aims, etc.). This does not mean that there is no shared view of the subject or that one cultural understanding is completely foreign to another; cognitive sciences bring the human subject under the constraints and affordances that all humans share and also akin to other living organisms that interact with their environments. It also reminds that language with its metaphoric and metonymic nature is deeply grounded in the body-world relationship.

We celebrate this opportunity to move the discourse of the study of the self forward in ancient Judaism by devoting an issue of *Dead Sea Discoveries* to this topic. And we felt it most appropriate to dedicate this publication to Carol Newsom on the occasion of her 70th birthday. We close this preface by celebrating and honoring the work of Carol Newsom on the Self across decades of exemplary scholarship, mentoring, collegiality, and research.

Carol Newsom's work explores the nature of selfhood and agency in ancient biblical and extra biblical traditions, with a particular focus on the Persian and Hellenistic periods, and she achieves this with tremendous depth, comparative subtlety and a breathtaking command of existing scholarship. Her reading of the primary sources is always from a new standpoint. As is characteristic of all her work, she asks new questions from a broad array of disciplines and always brings new voices (young and old) to the field. Her work never ceases to surprise the reader with remarkably fresh insights, interpretations and philosophical and psychological observations.

Carol Newsom has been one of the most important voices on this topic across the history of scholarship and textual analysis. Her work has helped us conceive of the self, symbolic forms, subjectivity, and agency. Her book *The Self as Symbolic Space: Constructing Identity and Community at Qumran* (2004), along with her field defining work on the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, the Hodayot, Job and Daniel, has deepened our understanding of how ancient Jewish communities were thinking, praying and reading. In *The Self as Symbolic Space*, she analyses with philological rigor and conceptual clarity the interaction between discursive strategies and the formation of subjectivity, especially in light of the disciplinary potential of an exclusive community. In a more recent series of articles and in a forthcoming monograph, she addresses complex questions of moral agency, engaging models of indigenous psychologies, and she probes the origins of the introspective self along distinct trajectories leading from Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Psalm 51 into the breadth and depth of Second Temple literature.²⁴

24 See above, footnote 13.

With this issue we want to honor the ways in which her research has generated new pathways in scholarship. May her light continue to shine brightly and may we continue to learn from her wisdom and insight into the Self.

The discourse of formation of the subject still has much to learn from Ancient Judaism, and it is our claim that the Dead Sea Scrolls have much to contribute. It is our hope and conviction that the essays in this issue of Dead Sea Discoveries can advance this important topic for the ancient world.

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