

Iconic Scriptures from Decalogue to Bible

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Article abstract

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ICONIC SCRIPTURES FROM DECALOGUE TO BIBLE

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ABSTRACT

An “iconic book” is a text revered primarily as an object of power rather than just as words of instruction, information, or insight. The emerging study of iconic books and texts draws especially on comparative scriptures studies (e.g. Graham, Watts) and icon theory (e.g. Brown, Parmenter) to develop frameworks for understanding the ritual production, display, and manipulation of material texts. People usually assume that books and other kinds of texts gain iconic status secondarily, after their semantic contents gain influence and prestige. That assumption is called into question by the study of the form and functions of ancient Near Eastern texts, many of which were created for iconic use. Iconic ritualization was also a key factor in creating the first Western scripture, the Jewish Torah. It narrates the gift of divinely written tablets to Moses, tablets that are never read but rather enshrined in a book reliquary (the Ark of the Covenant) that represents God’s presence with Israel. Simultaneously, Moses writes scrolls of Torah (law or instruction) that accompany the Ark of the Covenant, report on the tablets’ origins and contents, among other things, and must be read aloud regularly to the entire people of Israel. Jewish tradition soon came to regard the Torah, too, as written in heaven. In this way, iconic display joined ritualized performance and semantic interpretation as engines for scripturalizing Torah in antiquity as well as the Bibles that incorporated it in later periods.

RÉSUMÉ

Un « livre iconique » est un ouvrage qui est d’abord célébré en tant qu’objet de pouvoir plutôt que comme un simple texte véhiculant une marche à suivre, de l’information ou quelque réflexion. Le champ en émergence de l’étude des livres et des textes iconiques puise principalement aux études religieuses comparées (p. ex. Graham, Watts) et à la théorie des icônes (p. ex. Brown, Parmenter) dans l’élaboration de cadres qui permettent de comprendre la dimension rituelle de la production, de la présentation et de l’usage de textes matériels. On tient généralement pour acquis que les livres et autres textes se voient conférer un statut iconique dans un deuxième temps, après que leur contenu sémantique eut gagné en influence et en prestige. Cette perception mérite d’être réexaminée à la lumière de l’étude de la forme et des fonctions de textes anciens en provenance du Proche-

Orient, plusieurs desquels furent créés précisément pour servir d'icônes. La ritualisation iconique fut aussi un élément central dans la création des premières Écritures occidentales, soit la Torah juive. Cette dernière relate le don divin, à Moïse, de tables qui ne sont jamais lues mais sont plutôt consignées à un reliquaire (l'Arche d'Alliance) représentant la présence de Dieu au milieu d'Israël. Moïse, cependant, écrit les rouleaux de la Torah (la loi), qui coexistent avec l'Arche d'Alliance, expliquent entre autres choses l'origine des tables et leur contenu, et doivent être lus à voix haute fréquemment à tout le peuple d'Israël. Bientôt, la tradition juive en vint à considérer que la Torah avait elle aussi une origine divine. C'est donc dire que la présentation iconique est associée à une performance ritualisée et à une interprétation sémantique qui participèrent à la scripturalisation de la Torah dans l'Antiquité, mais aussi à celle des Bibles qui l'incorporèrent ultérieurement.

People carry, show, wave, touch, and kiss books and other texts, as well as read them, in secular and religious rituals around the globe. Images of books appear in art works, films, and advertisements to evoke learning, knowledge, and wisdom. Museums and libraries display old, rare, and beautiful manuscripts and printed volumes to enhance cultural knowledge and their own prestige.

I co-founded the Iconic Books Project at Syracuse University in 2001 to study these kinds of book practices.¹ Grouping these phenomena under the label “iconic books” points out their functional similarity to the icons of Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions.² An iconic book is a text revered primarily as an object of value and power rather than just as a container for words of instruction, information, or insight. The emerging study of iconic books and texts draws especially on comparative scriptures studies and icon theory to develop frameworks for understanding the ritual manipulation, display, production, and disposal of material texts.³

Three symposia on the topic of iconic books took place at Syracuse University and Hamilton College in upstate New York in 2007, 2009, and 2010. They gathered together experts in diverse fields specializing in different periods of history and in a wide variety of cultures and religious traditions. The papers from these symposia were published in the journal *Postscripts* (2010/2012) and collected with some earlier *Postscripts* (2006/2008) articles in a volume of collected essays, *Iconic Books and Texts* (2013). We

founded the Society for Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts (SCRIPT) in 2010 to continue this interdisciplinary collaboration.⁴

My own research takes part in this effort by focusing specifically on the functions of scriptures as ritualized texts. J. Z. Smith observed that rituals serve to draw sustained attention to specific occasions and behaviors.⁵ So religions call attention to certain books as scriptures by ritualizing how they are interpreted, read, and handled. These three different aspects of scripture ritualization—interpretation, reading, and handling—can best be understood, I suggest, as three ritualized dimensions of texts.⁶ Ritualizing interpretation through preaching, commentary, and even academic lectures ritualizes the semantic dimension. Ritualizing reading through public liturgies, recitations, chanting, and also by performing the text theatrically or illustrating its contents artistically ritualizes its performative dimension. But in this essay I focus on the iconic dimension, which gets ritualized through decoration, display, monumentalization, and personal amulets, among other things. Specifically, I will consider the chronological relationship between iconic ritualization and the other dimensions of scriptures.

Writing Iconic Texts

It would be natural to think that iconic veneration of scriptures is an aftereffect of scripturalization, a secondary product of people believing in the sacred nature of specific books. One might think that these texts were first written just to communicate through the meaning of their words. Then, as those words became increasingly influential, the physical text itself began to be venerated, decorated, carried around, and monumentalized in the ways mentioned above. That is what people usually assume about the Bible, that biblical books became iconic secondarily after their semantic contents gained influence and prestige. It is tempting to relegate ritualization in general, and ritualization of the iconic dimension in particular, to the *history* of biblical interpretation and ritual, to argue that they had no role in how scriptures were written and canonized.⁷

This assumption is called into question, first of all, by the forms and functions of texts in the earliest literate cultures. Many ancient Near Eastern texts were created for iconic use. Kings inscribed texts lauding their achievements on stone monuments and walls to exhibit their power and

wealth not only by their rhetoric but also by their scale and expense, especially in ancient societies with very low literacy rates.⁸ Texts were frequently created for iconic uses that interfered with reading them: commemorative texts were inscribed on precious materials to be deposited in the foundations and in the inner sancta of temples, curses were written on clay representations of enemies and then shattered, blessings were recorded in tiny script to be carried perpetually in personal amulets. There is ample evidence that many texts were not only copied but also composed in the first place to serve such iconic functions.

My thesis, therefore, is that iconic ritualization is not necessarily a secondary product of venerating sacred texts. It can instead be a generator of textual veneration in the first place. A good example of this process can be found in the first scripture of Western religious history, the Torah or Pentateuch, which consists of the first five books of Jewish and Christian Bibles. (The five books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.)

Ritualizing Iconic Texts in the Pentateuch

The first reason to think that the ritual manipulation of physical texts accompanied the formation of biblical literature is the fact that the Pentateuch commands its own ritualization in the iconic and performative dimensions.

Moses, at the end of Deuteronomy, orders the Levitical priests to assemble all the Israelites—men, women, and children explicitly included—to hear the whole Torah read aloud: “Every seventh year, . . . you shall read this Torah in the presence of all Israel” (Deuteronomy 31:10-11). The Torah, then, portrays itself as intended for public display and performance. Furthermore, stories in the Hebrew Bible about later events record at least three occasions when this command was fulfilled: by Moses’s successor, Joshua (Joshua 8); six hundred year later by King Josiah (2 Kings 22-23); and two hundred years after that by Ezra, the priest and scribe: “Ezra opened the scroll in the sight of all the people . . . ; as he opened it, all the people stood up. . . . The Levites explained the Torah to the people, while the people stood in their places” (Nehemiah 8:5, 7). By their focus on the ritualized assembly of the people, these texts show the Torah functioning as scripture not just by having its contents published for all to hear (the

performative dimension), but also by its public display to provide the physical evidence that legitimized the authority of these different leaders (the iconic dimension). The writers of Deuteronomy intended their text to be ritualized in these ways from the start.

Deuteronomy also requires Israelites to use Pentateuchal texts as personal amulets and public inscriptions: “Bind [these words] as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:8–9). This command can be interpreted metaphorically to refer to the memorization of the Torah’s instructions, but traditional Judaism has also taken it literally. For at least the last two thousand years, miniature parchments inscribed with selections of Pentateuchal texts have been placed in phylacteries (*tefillin*) worn on forehead and arms during prayers, as well as placed in containers (*mezuzahs*) on doorposts and gateposts.⁹ Again, Deuteronomy itself commands this iconic ritualization of its text.

The Pentateuch also describes the tablets that contain the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, as intended to function as a relic text from the start: “[God] gave Moses the two tablets of the covenant, stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18). It is interesting that, in every biblical text that narrates this story, the oral proclamation of the Ten Commandments always precedes their inscription by God or Moses.¹⁰ No text describes anyone ever reading the tablets after they have been written.

I call the Decalogue tablets a “relic text” because they are valued for being the specific objects that they are. Relic texts are rare, if not one-of-a-kind, and are in theory not reproducible.¹¹ The bodily relics commonly venerated in many Christian and Buddhist traditions provide more appropriate models for how such texts function than icons do. Relic texts get ritualized in the iconic dimension alone, so their chief function is legitimation. People do not read them much. Instead, they value their possession: owning relic texts legitimizes individuals and communities and conveys a sense of empowerment, while losing them threatens their identity. So the Pentateuch portrays the Decalogue tablets as written to validate the covenant between God and Israel. The tablets serve as physical evidence of the treaty that turns God into Israel’s king and that requires the people of Israel to remain loyal to their divine monarch.

Sacred relics generally require reliquaries. Reliquaries are containers ranging in size from small boxes to huge buildings that are designed to house and protect relics. The Pentateuch requires that the Decalogue tablets be deposited in such a reliquary chest, the Ark of the Covenant: “I will inscribe the commandments on the tablets . . . and you must deposit them in the ark” (Deuteronomy 10:2). Though Deuteronomy mentions only a simple wooden box, Exodus 25 describes a very richly gilded box with a solid gold cover, surmounted by golden cherubim similar to Egyptian sphinxes or medieval griffins. Examples of similar chests surmounted by the jackal god, Anubis, have been discovered in Egypt, most notably in King Tutankhamen’s tomb. They contained ritual texts as well as embalming chemicals and ritual wands. The Pentateuch describes Israel’s ark as also containing a jar of manna, the miraculous food that sustained the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 16:32–34), and Aaron’s staff that miraculously bloomed to demonstrate the priest’s God-given supremacy over Israel’s rituals and teachings (Numbers 17:10). But the ark is defined by the relic texts that it contains, by the tablets of the covenant given by God to Moses. Deuteronomy 31:24–26 requires that a copy of the Torah scroll also be deposited in the sanctuary beside the Ark of the Covenant. Thus the public, exoteric text—the scroll—gets associated with the mystical, esoteric text—the tablets—that it describes. Once the ark and its tablets disappeared, probably during the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 BCE, the scroll of Torah remained the only physical evidence for the tablets, the commandments, and the Torah. The ark and its contents remain literarily available now in the pages of the Bible.¹²

The Torah was also ritualized as a monumental inscription early in Israel’s history, according to the stories about Israel’s conquest of the promised land of Canaan. Joshua inscribed the Torah on a stone altar before leading the Israelites in reciting its contents: “Joshua built an altar On the stones, he inscribed a copy of the Torah that Moses had written for the Israelites” (Joshua 8:30, 32). Monumental inscriptions were commonly used in the ancient Near East not only to commemorate people and events, but also to ratify treaties and laws. Joshua’s inscription of the Torah inside the land of Israel ratifies its application as the law of the Israelites in *this* land.

Iconic Legitimation

The means of iconic ritualization of scriptures have stayed remarkably consistent over the millennia, in contrast to the means by which Jews and Christians ritualize their semantic and performative dimensions. Though the Psalms still get used as texts for worship music and also for communal and individual meditation, uses for which the Psalter seems to have been designed, the semantic uses of many other biblical texts have been dramatically transformed from their original functions. That includes much of the Pentateuch. Leviticus 1-16, for example, was written to prescribe or at least legitimize ritual performances in ancient Israel's temples. After those temples were destroyed almost two thousand years ago, the ritualized reading and interpretation of Leviticus 1-16 replaced those same rituals in Rabbinic Judaism, while Christian liturgies for the most part excluded these texts entirely. The contents of Leviticus have been allegorized for theological meanings by Jewish and Christian commentators alike.

By contrast, the ritual manipulation of physical texts of scriptures or other sacred texts has remained remarkably consistent over four thousand years. The deliberate display and physical manipulation of scrolls and codices of scriptures by modern priests, rabbis, and even evangelical ministers is quite similar to the depictions of priests, scribes, and angels doing the same thing in the art of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. And when it comes to monumental display, Decalogue tablets in monumental form are still being installed on public land in the United States to validate the religious origins of the nation's laws. Lawsuits requiring the removal of the monuments conversely deny the legitimacy of that claim.¹³

The function of iconic ritualization is to legitimize the texts, their contents, and those people and institutions associated with the texts as their owners and interpreters. Proving possession by displaying relic texts or their reliquaries provides them with prestige and legitimacy.¹⁴

Who or what then did the writers of the Pentateuch wish to legitimize by requiring the iconic ritualization of Torah scrolls and Decalogue tablets? The obvious answer is Israel itself and its claims to the land promised by God. The Pentateuch's sanctions, however, make those claims contingent on obedience to the stipulations of the covenant, that is, to Torah (Leviticus

27, Deuteronomy 27–30). So ritualizing the Torah’s iconic dimension legitimizes the laws and instructions contained within it. It also legitimizes those people whose job it was to enact those instructions in Israel’s temples and to teach the people of Israel how to obey the Torah properly.

Leviticus grants that job to one family, the descendants of the first high priest, Aaron: “The Lord spoke to Aaron: . . . This is a permanent mandate throughout your generations: to separate the holy from the secular and the polluted from the pure, and to teach the children of Israel all the mandates that the Lord spoke to them through Moses” (Leviticus 10:8–11). Aaron’s descendants have not wielded religious leadership in Jewish and Christian communities for almost two thousand years. They were replaced in Judaism by scholarly rabbis who claimed Moses’ mantle as interpreters of Torah or in Christianity by priests and churches claiming authority from the Christ of the Gospels rather than the Moses of the Torah. The Torah nevertheless continues to legitimate the authority of Aaron’s descendants over one religious tradition, that of the Samaritans who now number less than one thousand people. Their current high priest is Abed-El ben Matzliach, who claims descent from Aaron through his son, Ithamar.¹⁵

From the sixth century B.C.E. through the first century C.E., however, dynasties of Aaronide high priests governed both Jewish and Samaritan temples. As this period wore on, they also accumulated political power. It was the high priest who represented Jews to foreign emperors such as Alexander and the Romans. One of these priestly dynasties, the Hasmoneans or Maccabees, succeeded in wresting Judean independence from imperial domination for eighty years in the second and first centuries B.C.E. Some of these rulers claimed the title “king” as well as “high priest.”

It was early in the period of Aaronide high priests that the Torah began to function as scripture for Jews and Samaritans. Its contents first directed the ritual practices of their temples. Then over time its application spread beyond the temples to the behavior of Jews and Samaritans in their villages and homes. Thus, while Aaronide priests consolidated their religious authority and political power from their base in the temples, the law book that governed those temples spread its authority and influence over Jewish and Samaritan communities.¹⁶ Priests and Torah rose to prominence

together: the priests ritualized the Torah and the Torah legitimized the priests.

Iconic ritualization was therefore a key factor in creating the first Western scripture, the Torah. The Torah narrates the gift of divinely written tablets to Moses, tablets that are never read but instead enshrined in a book reliquary (the Ark of the Covenant) that represents God's presence with Israel. Simultaneously, Moses writes scrolls of torah (law or instruction) that accompany the Ark of the Covenant, that report on the tablets' origins and contents, among other things, and that must be read aloud regularly to the entire people of Israel. Religious devotion soon came to regard the Torah, too, as written in heaven.¹⁷ In this way, iconic display joined ritualized performance and semantic interpretation as engines for scripturalizing Torah, both in antiquity and in later periods when Bibles incorporated the Pentateuch into larger collections of scriptures.

Ritualizing texts in the iconic dimension therefore played a fundamental role in how the Torah, and later the rest of the Jewish and Christian Bibles, came to be scripture. It still plays a major role in preserving the Torah's and Bible's status as scripture in Jewish, Samaritan, and Christian communities. It was the ancient writers of the Pentateuch who mandated their text's iconic ritualization in these ways, though they could not possibly have foreseen the remarkable success of this strategy.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

James W. Watts is Professor of Religion and Chair of the Department of Religion at Syracuse University, where he has taught since 1999. He is a biblical scholar whose research focuses on the interplay of ritual and rhetoric in the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible. He also directs the Iconic Books Project, leading an interdisciplinary team of scholars in investigating the social functions of material texts. He combines the two research interests in his comparative studies of the ritualizing of scriptures. He is the author of *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield, 1999), *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge, 2007) and *Leviticus 1-10* (Peeters, 2013), and the editor of *Iconic Books and Texts* (Equinox, 2013).

Notes

¹ See Iconic Books Project at <http://iconicbooks.net>.

² See especially Dorina Miller Parmenter, “The Iconic Book: The Image of the Bible in Early Christian Rituals,” *Postscripts* 2 no. 2/3 (2006/2008): 160–89; also in *Iconic Books and Texts*, ed. James W. Watts (London: Equinox, 2013), 63–92. See also Dorina Miller Parmenter, “The Iconic Book: The Image of the Christian Bible in Myth and Ritual” (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2009).

³ For a survey of this research, see James W. Watts, “Iconic Books and Texts” in *The Routledge History of Books and Literacy*, ed. Sydney Shep (New York: Routledge, forthcoming). For iconic books in comparative scriptures studies, see Kristina Myrvold, ed., *The Death of Sacred Texts: Ritual Disposal and Renovation of Texts in World Religions* (London: Ashgate, 2010); and William A. Graham, “Winged Words?: Scriptures and Classics as Iconic Texts,” *Postscripts* 6 (2010/2012): 7–22; also in *Iconic Books and Texts*, ed. James W. Watts (London: Equinox, 2013), 33–46. For iconic books and icon theory, see Parmenter, “The Iconic Book,” and Michelle P. Brown, “Images to Be Read and Words to Be Seen: The Iconic Role of the Early Medieval Book,” *Postscripts* 6 (2010/2012): 39–66; also in *Iconic Books and Texts*, ed. James W. Watts (London: Equinox, 2013), 93–118.

⁴ SCRIPT’s website can be found at www.script-site.net.

⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 109.

⁶ James W. Watts, “The Three Dimensions of Scriptures,” *Postscripts* 2, no. 2/3 (2006/2008): 135–159; also in *Iconic Books and Texts*, ed. James W. Watts (London: Equinox, 2013), 9–32.

⁷ Reception history has become a major trend in biblical scholarship over the past two decades. Its influence remains restricted, however, by the tendency to distinguish the text’s original meaning in the minds of its authors from its later interpretation and use. Timothy Beal has recently argued for a broader approach to the “cultural history of the Bible” that would incorporate the history of media and usage from the text’s origins up to the present day (“Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011): 357–72).

⁸ Mario Liverani, “The Deeds of Ancient Mesopotamian Kings,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. M. Sasson (New York: Scribners, 1995), 2353–65.

⁹ See Yehudah B. Cohn, *Tangled Up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World* (Providence: Brown University, 2008).

¹⁰ Compare Exodus 20:1-17 with Exodus 24:4, 12, and 31:18; Exodus 34:10-26 with 34:27-28; and Deuteronomy 5:6-21 with 9:10-11 and 10:1-5.

¹¹ See further, James W. Watts, “Relic Texts,” *Iconic Books Blog*, June 8, 2012, <http://iconicbooks.blogspot.com/2012/06/relic-texts.html>.

¹² For a more detailed defense of this thesis, see James W. Watts, “From Ark of the Covenant to Torah Scroll: Ritualizing Israel’s Iconic Texts,” in *Ritual Innovation*, ed. Nathan MacDonald (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

¹³ See James W. Watts, “Ten Commandments Monuments and the Rivalry of Iconic Texts,” *Journal of Religion & Society* 6 (2004), <http://moses.creighton.edu/jrs/2004/2004-13.pdf>.

¹⁴ Watts, “Three Dimensions,” 148–50.

¹⁵ See “High Priests” on the Samaritan community’s website at <http://www.the-samaritans.com/high-priests/>. For the ancient history of the Samaritans, see also Gary N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: the Origins and History of their Early Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ See C. T. R. Hayward, “Scripture in the Jerusalem Temple,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to 600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 321–44; and James W. Watts, “The Political and Legal Uses of Scripture,” in *New Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to 600*, 345–64.

¹⁷ Sirach 24:23; Baruch 4:1; Acts 7:53. See Dorina Miller Parmenter, “The Bible as Icon: Myths of the Divine Origins of Scripture,” in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, ed. C. A. Evans and H. D. Zacharias (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 298–310.

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