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Written with the Finger of God: Divine and Human Writing in Exodus

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Written with the Finger of God Divine and Human Writing in Exodus¹

—Brian Doak

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps it is the modern obsession with communication technologies that has inspired a re-investigation of the Hebrew Bible as the product of not only the interplay between different types of communication in the ancient world (oral and written), but also the representation of writing in ancient literature. As Mogens Trolle Larsen aptly states,

1. *Author's note:* It is with great pleasure that I offer this essay to Stan and Ruth Burgess, whose guidance and pedagogy shaped my graduate experience at Missouri State University from 2002–2004. This essay, the first I wrote while a PhD student at Harvard University in the Fall of 2006, reminds me of the process of learning, of acclimating to a new environment, and of the excitement associated with change that the Burgesses modeled so well for me. Except for some font adjustments, I have left this essay unrevised; however, I would like to note three important books not cited below (all published after I wrote this essay) that address the question of literacy and the Bible in different ways: van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*; Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew*; and Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel*.

In a situation where the general feeling seems to be that technological “progress” or “development” is rushing ahead like an express train into the night, propelled by its own internal logic and changing the world with irresistible force, it is obviously of vital interest to study other similar or parallel historical moments when new techniques for storing and disseminating knowledge, ideas and information were introduced.²

This search for the specifically *written* origins of a tradition, though stimulated by our own preoccupations, is not without warrant in the literary and historical depictions of writing in ancient cultures; in many languages and literatures, the act of writing is treated with a distinct sense of awe, or even dread. The knowledge of those who write is arcane, the writers are divinities or revered leaders, and their written product is a tool of creation and destruction.

The canonical and historical centrality of the book of Exodus for the religious traditions of ancient Israel only serves to emphasize the multiple and significant acts of writing perpetrated by both God and humans in that book. Indeed, arguably the central features of the Torah—the giving of the tablets of law to Moses, and the Sinai encounter in general—are surrounded by descriptions of writing. Despite the multiple examples of this important motif, there have been few concerted attempts to specifically discuss the role of writing in Exodus as a whole. Therefore my goals here are twofold:

- (1) To make a detailed case for the significance of both divine and human writing in Exodus. By the end of this study, it will hopefully be clear that writing plays a decisive role in the narrative construction of Exodus and also that the memories of writing enshrined in Exodus serve to bolster the sense of power and awe attached to the Torah as a document.
- (2) To explore the connection of writing and cultic acts, which are referenced together (or in close proximity to one another) in all of the critical passages (the battle with Amalek in 17:14–15, the vision of God on the mountain in 24:1–8; the “golden calf” episode in 31:18–32:35; the

2. Larsen, “Introduction,” in *Literacy and Society*, 7. Bowman and Woolf speculate that the “enormous growth, over the past quarter-century, of interest in writing and literacy is simply the manifestation of our own society’s graphocentrism, our obsession with the written word.” “Literacy and Power in the Ancient World,” 1. Ong speaks of entering into a type of “secondary orality” in the modern world: “Contrasts between electronic media and print have sensitized us to the earlier contrast between writing and orality. The electronic age is also an age of ‘secondary orality,’ the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence.” *Orality and Literacy*, 3.

inscribing of cultic apparel in 28:9–12, 36–38, 39:14–30). I will suggest that writing and cult may have been more intimately connected during some periods of Israel's religious activity, and that the act of writing and the products of writing are intimately involved in the search for God's physical representation on earth.

To these ends, we must first make some preliminary comments on the nature of writing in the ancient world and the secondary literature which has arisen over the past few decades regarding the complex interplay of orality and literacy in traditional societies (including ancient Israel). An examination of passages in Exodus where writing occurs will follow; wherever appropriate, we must seek to integrate the discussion of the biblical text with some ancient Near Eastern materials and with the anthropological study of writing and religion.

ORALITY AND THE POWER OF WRITING

The multitude of artistic representations of Moses and the written tablets of the Law produced since antiquity—ranging from the frescos of *Dura Europas* (third century CE; Syria), where Moses receives the Torah on a scroll instead of the traditional stone tablets, to Rembrandt van Rijn's brooding portrait of the embattled leader on the verge of smashing the Law at the foot of the mountain (1659; Gemäldegalerie, Berlin)—bear witness to the role of writing in semi- or non-literate cultures; writing is viewed with awe and suspicion, even danger, and can act as a tangible link between humans, divinity, and the very nature of reality. The historical invention and development of writing in southern Mesopotamia sometime in the late fourth millennium was, of course, much more mundane than the account of Berossus in his third-century BCE *Babyloniaca*, where humans who had previously been living “without laws just as wild animals” are granted “the knowledge of letters and sciences and crafts of all types” by a “beast named Oannes . . . from the Erythraean Sea” [i.e. Persian Gulf].³

Nevertheless, Berossus' description of Oannes highlights an attitude toward writing prevalent throughout nearly all ancient societies and even some modern oral cultures—writing is bestowed upon humanity by deities, and is thus inherently endowed with numinous powers which transform human society. This ancient Near Eastern emphasis on the positive and civilizing origins of the craft stands in stark contrast to Plato's *Phaedrus* dialogue, which, less than a century before Berossus, famously decries the power of the written word. Plato does this by giving Socrates a short myth to tell of

3. Translation by Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus*, 155–56.

the origins of writing in Egypt: Theuth [Egyptian Thoth] creates writing and extols its virtues to the king, Thamus, who offers a series of critiques.⁴ Socrates goes on to announce that it is a “great folly . . . to suppose that one can transmit or acquire clear and certain knowledge of an art through the medium of writing, or that written words can do more than remind the reader of what he already knows on any given subject.”⁵

Unlike with Oannes or Thoth, however, writing is not introduced to Israel in the Hebrew Bible as a general gift or cultural achievement, but rather in the highly specific terms of YHWH’s socio-legal program for his people.⁶ The technology is conspicuously absent from the etiological accounts in Genesis 1–11 (though compare the development of other technologies in Gen 4:20–22); the patriarchs certainly do not write, while canonically later characters like Ezra and Daniel can read and interpret with fluency. In this respect, the authors of the Bible seem to be aware of the emergence of writing at a certain time period and do not commit the blunders of anachronism that might have been possible regarding the issue of literacy.⁷ Homer (or the Homeric tradition), in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, is mostly aware of the issue as well, and avoids presenting us with writers in both stories.⁸

Numerous recent articles and monographs have examined the rise of literacy in antiquity and the interactions between and within oral and literate cultures, not all of which can be discussed here.⁹ The result of the

4. As Ong points out, Thamus’s objections are identical to those raised in criticism of computers: “[T]hey will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of on their own internal resources . . . And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society” (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275; pp. 96–97).

5. *Ibid.*, 97.

6. Although it is unlikely that what we have in Exodus is an “etiological” narrative for the “creation” of all writing in the world, the references to writing in Exodus do act as an etiology of writing *for Israel*, insofar as they are the first references to writing in the Bible and are presented with the mystery and divine sanction of other etiological stories (such as those throughout Genesis).

7. However, Demsky’s periodization of the history of Israelite religion into “the preliterate patriarchal period, the literate Mosaic faith and the post-Exilic *Book centered* reforms of Ezra” is too extreme. Demsky, “Writing in Ancient Israel,” 18.

8. The one remarkable exception occurs in the *Iliad* 6.198.99: Proteus sends Bellerophon to Lycia with “tokens / murderous signs, scratched in a folded tablet / and many of them too, enough to kill a man.” The reference is possibly too cryptic to identify as writing for certain, however. See comments in Knox’s introduction and notes to Fagles’s translation, *The Iliad*, 21, esp. 201.

9. This interest in orality, literacy, and the rise of the book is widespread in the

last twenty or so years of intense research into writing and literacy has also helped to clarify the meaning of writing in both ancient and modern societies, and taught us not to overlook references to writing in religious texts. In his landmark study, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (1982), Walter Ong made an important contribution to our understanding of the effects of writing. Ong suggested that writing is not “just another way” to convey thoughts (in addition to oral discourse), but that the act of writing actually restructures human consciousness. Although printed text seems ubiquitous around us, Ong reminds his readers of the enduring value of orality, and of the complex interplay between text and oral communication: “Orality is not an ideal, and never was . . . Yet orality is not despicable. It can produce creations beyond the reach of literates . . . Nor is orality ever completely eradicable: reading a text oralizes it. Both orality and the growth of literacy out of orality are necessary for the evolution of consciousness.”¹⁰ Ong’s work, along with that of Jack Goody,¹¹ has been highly influential on biblical scholars who have taken up the issue of writing within the biblical texts.

Perhaps no recent work on writing and the biblical text has been as influential for understanding the textuality/orality interaction as Susan Niditch’s *Oral World and Written Word* (1996). Niditch repeatedly warns against drawing an “artificial” line between oral and written expression, and has sought to understand the biblical text in terms of its “oral register,” which can be explicated in terms of content pattern, formula or conventionalized patterns, and other stylistic features which can help determine the (originally) oral or written nature of a text.¹²

humanities as of late. For a sample of some recent (book-length) work in a variety of disciplines, see Mackay, ed., *Signs of Orality*; Worthington and Foley, eds., *Epea and Grammata*. Mnemosyne, *Bibliotheca Classica Batava Supplementum*; Olson and Torrance, *Literacy and Orality*; Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition*; Chinca, Young, and Green, eds., *Orality and Literacy in the Middle Ages*. A recent seminar at the University of Chicago reflected on the role of writing vis-à-vis empire in the ancient Near East, with collected papers in Sanders, ed., *Margins of Writing*.

For shorter studies, see Swearingen, “Oral Hermeneutics,” 138–56; Gillespie, “Literacy, Orality, and the Parry-Lord ‘Formula’” 147–64; Henrichs, “‘Hieroi Logio’ and ‘Hierai Biblio,’” 207–66; Rodgers, “Orality, Literacy, and Batak Concepts of Marriage Alliance,” 433–50; Ong, “Orality, Literacy, and Medieval Textualization,” 1–12.

10. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 171–72.

11. For a convenient summary of Goody’s work, see Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition*. Other studies have attempted to tackle the issue from the specific perspective of religious texts. For example, in *Beyond the Written Word*, Graham has focused his work not on the supposed and frequently studied dichotomy between oral and written traditions, but rather “the ongoing function of scriptural texts as oral phenomenon,” 7.

12. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 10–11.

Niditch explicitly rejects a simplistic and anachronistic analysis of “literacy” in ancient Israel, noting that “‘pragmatic’ literacy in the pre-monarchic period probably meant ‘learning enough to read a list, a name, some numbers,’”¹³ and her rejection of “the romantic notion of an oral period in the history of Israel followed by the time of literacy in which Israelite literature becomes written and bookish” has important implications for our study, since Exodus narrates the putative transition from solely oral, human leadership to the presence of an “authoritative text” (i.e., the tablets).¹⁴

Turning more specifically to the *effects* of writing in the ancient world, it is important to note that in the ancient Near East, writing was not primarily an avenue of “self expression” for individuals, as it often is today. P. Machinist has discussed the role of writing in the service of the ancient Near Eastern empires in a manner pertinent to our discussion here. Writing does not only affect those who can read it, but the mere presence of writing can convey a sense of intimidation and even political power in the ancient world. Regarding the Assyrian inscriptions, Machinist draws our attention to factors such as the physical size of the monument, its exclusivity, and its confirmation of political hierarchies: “It was the very monumentality of the inscription . . . that communicated the monumentality of power and sovereignty—a monumentality that could be enhanced by artistic scenes and symbols that were not infrequently joined to the denotative, the inscriptional text.” Thus, the text “gave to those who could read it another form of enhancement because it specified and nuanced the message of power and sovereignty not only by what it actually said, but by the sense of exclusiveness, the privilege of elite membership, it conferred on its readers.”¹⁵ R. Thomas has characterized the public inscriptions of the Athenian empire in a similar fashion. For example, the “Coinage Decree” (meant to standardize coinage and weights/measures on Athens’ allies) was to be written on a stele in the polis and in front of the local mints. These decrees were “to be visible to impress on the allies the weight of Athens’ authority, like a settlement

13. Ibid., 40. Here, Niditch follows an argument of Meyers in *Discovering Eve*, 1988.

14. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 134. Eyre and Baines make a similar point regarding writing in ancient Egypt: “Literacy was not a single invention that immediately changed the life of all who attained it . . . There are many historical gradations of literacy and changes in its potential, from being an extension or form of memory for recording and a vehicle for the display of prestige, to its eventual status as a quasi-independent means of communication (which it never achieved in Egypt).” “Interactions,” 113–14.

15. Machinist, “Final Response,” 295. See also the comments of Zimansky, “Writing, Writers, and Reading,” 268–69, in the same volume. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 43, has observed this dynamic for the Assyrian inscriptions as well, and also cites Machinist, “Assyrians on Assyria,” 101.

after a revolt, to intimidate as well as to communicate, to impress as well as to record on stone.”¹⁶

The illiterate in a given ancient society may well have recognized writing—indeed, even today, non-literate individuals are often acutely aware of the presence of writing around them—but, as Machinist points out, “their inability to read the writing, their helplessness before it, would have communicated to them the superior authority of the rulership from which the writing came, and so, in a way complementary to those able to read, would have confirmed the hierarchy that the overall political system was founded on.”¹⁷ Although we are obviously not dealing with monumental inscriptions in Exodus (in fact, none have yet been uncovered in the Levant by any Israelite monarch), we are dealing with a textual representation of a similar kind of dynamic to that envisioned by Machinist in ancient Mesopotamia. The Tablets of the Law in Exodus are monuments of their own kind. Moses stands with the tablets, elevated above the people on Sinai; he proclaims their words to a people who, we are told, spend at least some of their time at the holy mountain cowering in fear (19:16). The written monument, over against the spoken word, conveys an autonomous sense of power and authority. “What appears . . . to be the most characteristic feature of the folklore about writing is that writing is interpreted as a physical act of power.” Speaking allows us to engage in a “constant struggle to obtain and retain this power of defining the world. But if [our] conception of the world is fixed by some agency beyond my control [e.g. writing], [our] speaking has no power.”¹⁸

A final note should be made regarding two of the more current studies in the textualization of ancient Israel: W. Schniedewind’s *How the Bible Became a Book* (2004) and D. Carr’s *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart* (2005).¹⁹ The latter examines the role of literacy and writing in the process of elite “socialization” and “enculturation” in ancient Israel and the broader ancient Near East, among other things, and the way these methods evolved through the Hellenistic period. Schniedewind’s work brings more to bear on the presence of writing in Exodus, since major portions of his study address

16. Thomas, “Literacy in Archaic and Classical Greece,” 44. See also Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 45–47, for some examples of writing as a “projection of state power” from Ugarit.

17. Machinist, “Final Reponse,” 295.

18. Holbek, “What the Illiterate Think of Writing,” 192. Of course, this is partly an exaggeration, since a given culture must “decide,” consciously or unconsciously, to elevate writing and the “the book” to this position of power and “autonomy.”

19. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*; Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*.

what he calls the “numinous power of writing.” In an atmosphere (such as ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia) where as little as one percent of the population could claim literacy, “writing was a guarded knowledge of political and religious elites.”²⁰ As such, writing appeared in magical formulae, such as the Egyptian execration texts or third millennium Pyramid Texts, and can be used to affect blessings or curses on humans. The curse formula taken by the “woman with a jealous husband” in Numbers 5:16–30 is a biblical example of ritual which depends upon the “numinous” power inherent in writing, as does the census tax in Exodus 30:11–16.²¹ We will return to some of these ideas at various junctures in our discussion of the divine and human writing acts in Exodus.

WRITING IN EXODUS: GOD AND MOSES, TABLET AND BOOK

Writing is described through a few key terms in Exodus.²² *Kātab* is the default verb in the narratives and describes the generic writing act.²³ In the first-person recapitulation of the Sinai events in Deuteronomy, the act of writing is mentioned repeatedly in 4:13–5:22, as well as in 9:10, 10:2–4, 17:18, and 27:8. Deuteronomy’s repeated references to the *written* nature of the laws and commandments act, whether intentionally or not, as a kind of macro-inclusio, encasing the contents of the Torah from Exodus 17 through Deuteronomy itself. With the possible exception of Daniel 5:5 (discussed below), divine writing only occurs in narrated sequence in the book of Exodus, making its appearance all the more significant in the context of the Sinai narrative.

Three other words appear to describe writing in Exodus: *ḥāraš*, *pātaḥ*, and *ḥārat*. In the writing of names upon precious stones in ch. 28, *pātaḥ* is used in the *piel* to describe the physical act of engraving upon the hard surface.²⁴ It appears that *ḥāraš* is basically a synonym of *pātaḥ* (when used

20. Ibid., 25.

21. Ibid., 27–34. For lack of space, we will not treat the census in Exodus 30 here, as the terminology of writing is not explicitly mentioned in the passage (though it is assumed).

22. For an insightful discussion of writing and writing materials in ancient Israel, see Lemaire, “Writing and Writing Materials,” 999–1008.

23. See Exod 17:14; 24:4, 11; 32:15; 1 Kgs 11:41; 2 Kgs 23:3, etc.

24. The verb is also used this way in 1 Kgs 7:36, where the temple craftsman engraves cherubim and palm trees upon various surfaces in the temple; whether or not the phrase *wyptḥ 'l ḥlḥt* in this verse was meant to have any resonance with the tablets in Exodus (or vice versa) is not clear. See the slightly different description of the cherubim

in the context of writing/engraving), as in the instructions of Exod 28:11: “[Like] the work of an engraver (*hrš*) of stone, [like] the engravings (*pth*) of a seal, you shall engrave upon the two stones the names of the sons of Israel.”²⁵ God’s own writing in 32:16 is described with a term unique in the Hebrew Bible, *hrwt* (“engraved”), which appears as a *qal* passive of *hrt* (which presumably means “engrave” or “incise”). Besides the divine finger, there are no explicit references made to writing tools in Exodus, with the possible exception of Aaron’s *hrwt* (discussed below).²⁶ Isaiah 8:1 has the prophet writing *bhrt* *nwš*, “with a human [normal?] engraving tool” (as if there are non-human writing tools available to the prophet which he might choose over the human tool?). Most of the writing in Exodus is enacted on hard surfaces, such as the stone tablets in chapters 32 and 34 and the cultic objects in chapters 28/39; other writing presumably occurs on a different surface (such as the *spr hbryt* in 24:7), but we are not told exactly what this might be.

17:14 Write This as a Memorial in a Book

The first injunction to write in Exodus comes at the conclusion of the battle in 17:14. Immediately after Moses/YHWH brings water from the rock at Horeb for the thirsting masses, the Israelites are attacked and experience their first battle. Joshua leads the army to victory over the Amalekites, “defeating Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword” (v. 13). Joshua’s military leadership (which appears here for the first time) and the miraculous cause of victory (Moses holding up his staff on the hill above the fight, vv. 11–12) prefigure the battle scenes in the book of Joshua, where the Israelites roam from city to city eradicating various Canaanite groups (although no indication is given in chapter 17 that we have the *hrm* in effect, as in Josh 6:21 or 8:26).²⁷ After the slaughter, YHWH commands Moses to “write this

engraving (using the *pth* as well) in 2 Chr 3:7.

25. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

26. It is clear that *hrt* and *hrt* are semantically related, although Propp notes that *hrt* is probably not a variant or misspelling of *hrt*, as *t* and *ṭ* are “rarely if ever confused.” Other roots which begin with *hr-* describe scratching, plowing, piercing, and digging; see Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 354–61; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 556.

27. In fact, as Childs notes, the basic meaning of the verb *hlš* is “disabled” or “to weaken,” indicating that the victory did not involve annihilation. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 311. Targum Onkelos uses *tbr*, “broke,” while the Greek has “put to flight, routed.” On the Greek, see Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus*, 270. For all references to the Targums in this chapter, see the translation and comments in Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus (based on the A. Sperber and A. Berliner editions)*.

as a memorial [or “remembrance”] (*zkrwn*) in a book (*spr*).²⁸ Not only is this the first writing activity commanded in Exodus, but it is also the first act of writing depicted in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible (following the canonical story line) by any “Hebrew” or Israelite.

What is Moses to write in the document (or “scroll”)? Presumably YHWH’s deliverance in battle and the account of the victory are to be recorded.²⁹ S. Parker suspects “war adventure” stories would have been popular in early Israel, and the remarkable nature of the victory against Amalek could serve as a lesson to future generations about YHWH’s provision and deliverance.³⁰ No indication is directly given that Moses’ writing activity will be read by anyone, including Joshua; rather, Joshua will apparently *hear* the memorial account—the command for Moses is first to write, and then, “place it in the ears of Joshua” (i.e., read it to him).³¹ Among the many issues in this exchange, one should notice the juxtaposition of two forms of communication—first writing, and then speaking/listening. There is no need to speculate as to whether the biblical authors believed accounts of such battles could circulate in written form or orally, since we have both writing and a verbal account narrated to Joshua.³²

Writing is used here to permanently establish a negative recollection of the Amalekites, one that appears again in 1 Samuel 15, where Saul fails to kill Agag and thus fails to completely annihilate the group.³³ According to Fretheim, the Amalekites have “become an embodiment of evil, Pharaoh revisited, a veritable Hitlerian specter, threatening God’s creational purposes.”³⁴ In a certain sense, the very writing of this book of memorial

28. Idiomatic English would have us translate *spr* as “a book,” without a definite article; if indeed the reference is to “the book,” then we might have to assume Moses has been carrying around a logbook, etc. Houtmann, *Exodus*, 386.

29. Cassuto suggests YHWH’s intention is for Moses to write about what happened in the battle and the words in v. 14, indicating Amalek’s permanent erasure from the earth. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 206. See also Houtmann, *Exodus* 2:385–86. There is no reason to suppose, however, as does Cassuto, that the words are written on the altar mentioned in v. 14.

30. Parker, *Stories in Scripture*, 9.

31. Targum Onkelos has *wšw qdm yhwš*, as if Joshua might read the book. Targum Onkelos seems alone in this interpretation. The reading of the book to the people in 24:7 is preserved as in the Masoretic Text, however.

32. Noth has also noticed this dual presentation, but probably draws too thick a line between Moses’ act and the “clearly oral tradition” represented with Joshua. See Noth, *Exodus*, 143.

33. Cf. Mal 3:16, where the “book of remembrance” carries a *positive* connotation for the righteous.

34. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 194.

would seem to actually *preserve*, and not “utterly blot out,” the memory of Amalek, as YHWH seems to intend at the end of v. 14: “for I will utterly blot out the memory (*zkr*) of Amalek from under the heavens.” Note the interplay between *zkrwn* and *zkr* in the two verses (cf. Deut 25:17–19). Propp points to the possibility that *zkr* can mean “name” (compare to Akk. *zakāru*, “to speak”), in the sense of posterity (as with *šm*), and thus “Amalek will never be forgotten, but will survive only as a memory.”³⁵

The author here makes an additional correlation between the act of writing and the erection of an altar in 17:15 (in that the writing immediately proceeds the altar building). The association between writing and cultic functions is quite strong in Exodus and resonates throughout the latter half of the book, culminating in chapter 32. Commentators are often perplexed at the formulation in 17:15b: “Moses built an altar, and he named it ‘YHWH is my banner’ (*ns*).”³⁶ What we have here is most likely the establishment of a kind of military standard or insignia, in tandem with the altar, which stands as a “divine emblem” of YHWH. The emblem need not be written, but perhaps we are to envision the *ns* bearing YHWH’s name or some other symbol. The beginning of the following verse is perhaps even more obscure: “And he said, for a hand (*yd*) on/against Yah’s *ks*,³⁷ YHWH will do battle against Amalek from generation to generation.” In light of the ambiguity, it is probably best to see *ks* in v. 16 as something similar to or connected with the “banner” or “emblem” in v. 15 (as the altar and name are related in Gen 35:7, for example).³⁸ The *ks* in v. 16 (and the *ns* in v. 15) may even be similar in form and function to the “Divine Weapons” (*kakkum*) and “Emblems” (*šurinnum*) referred to in Old Babylonian legal documents, where

35. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 619. Meyers notes the following: “‘Reminder’ and ‘remembrance’ are both from the root *zkr*, ‘to remember,’ and signify the commemorative processes of the biblical narrative.” Meyers, *Exodus*, 135.

36. For another use of *ns* with this meaning, see Isa 49:22. For a detailed text critical discussion of vv. 15–16, see Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 311–12.

37. Following Propp’s translation, *Exodus 1–19*, 614. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 310, has “banner,” while Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 207, sees the *yd* as a “memorial pillar”; “this altar shall be a *hand* . . . to the Lord’s plan” (from *kss*, “count” or “reckon”). The Targumists had ample problems with this verse as well; see Drazin’s comments (*Targum Onkelos to Exodus*, 178–79). The LXX calls the altar “the Lord is my refuge” and confusingly renders the first part of v. 16 as “for with a secret hand [?] the Lord fought,” losing any possible nuances in the Masoretic Text connecting the two comments in vv. 15–16. See also Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus*, 272–73.

38. It is also possible that both words should be *ns* (banner, pole), and that the *k* and *n* were confused due to their similar shape in the Aramaic/square script; *ks* could be an abbreviated form of *ks’* (chair, throne), although this form is found nowhere else. See Propp, *Exodus 1–19*, 620.

the symbols “played a practical part in the establishing of the truth as oaths were taken in front of the god’s symbol.”³⁹ One aspect of the rituals involving an emblem (*kidinnum*) from Elam seems to have involved litigants touching the emblem, although the association of such a rite with the statement “a hand on/against the Yah’s banner” is admittedly unclear.⁴⁰ YHWH’s *ks* reminds the people of the deity’s strength and his victory in face of their earlier complaint, and is thus similar in function to the written account (*zkrwn bspr*), an association which demonstrates the iconic role of writing and its connection with other sacred physical objects.

24:4, 12: Moses Wrote All the Words of YHWH

The acts of writing by Moses in 24:4 and the promise of future writing by YHWH himself in 24:12 serve to bracket the dazzling and highly anthropomorphic group encounter with YHWH atop Sinai in 24:9–11. The MT clearly states that Nadab, Abihu, Aaron, and the seventy elders “see God,” and the context of chapter 24 itself gives us no indication that we are to somehow exclude straightforward, visual perception as at least one part of this “seeing.”⁴¹ No context is given for the speaking in the beginning of the chapter, as an unidentified “he” tells Moses to ascend the mountain after the Covenant Code in chapters 20–23. The speaker (the “he”) is obviously YHWH,⁴² and Moses *orally* relates “all of the words of YHWH and all the judgments” in 24:3, to which the people respond in complete affirmation (compare with Josh 24:21–22). In the next verse (24:4), Moses begins writing, and proceeds to offer a sacrifice and sprinkle the altar with blood.⁴³ In verse 7, Moses reads from the hitherto unmentioned “book of the covenant”

39. Spaey, “Emblems and Rituals,” 413.

40. *Ibid.*, 413–14.

41. The LXX, for example, attempts to mitigate the actual visual perception of the deity in 24:10–11. See Hanson, “The Treatment in the LXX of the Theme of Seeing God,” 557–68.

42. Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 292, suggests “Yahweh has been speaking to someone else [i.e., the people in chapters 20–23], but now turns to Moses personally; Noth, *Exodus*, 196, recognizes this possibility, but believes the “to Moses” in v. 1 “is evidently attached to a speech of God directed towards another audience which may now be lost from the E context.”

43. Coogan claims the “earlier” passages depict God as a writer, or Moses as the scribe, as opposed to later materials (as in Deuteronomy) where a more literate population must be warned against adding or subtracting from the laws. Coogan, “Literacy in Ancient Israel,” 436. This assumption seems logical in the face of the evidence for developing literacy and the powers ascribed to writing by oral cultures, but is by no means certain.

(*spr hbryt*), and the people respond again with an affirmation formula similar to the one in v. 4 (with the addition of the phrase “and we will listen” at the end). The people are then sprinkled with blood, and then Israel’s leaders ascend the mountain to see God.

R. Hendel has discussed the ritual symbolism in 24:3–8, and, in dialogue with the earlier works of Robertson Smith, drawn appropriate attention to the overarching “cultural system” in which the sacrifice rituals should be viewed.⁴⁴ However, Hendel neglects to mention the act of writing in v. 4 or the book of the covenant in v. 7 as any part of this analysis. In my view, the interplay between oral commands, writing, and a “book of the covenant” demand equal consideration to the sacrificial acts in the pericope and cannot be easily disentangled from the rest of the chapter. Up until 24:4, the entire Sinai encounter (which began in chapter 19 and includes the narration of the Covenant Code in chapters 20–23) has not mentioned writing.⁴⁵ Schniedewind thinks that “the story of the revelation in Exodus 19–23 seems unaware that the Torah is text”; after all, “the Ten Commandments are prefaced by Moses’ [words] saying that ‘God *spoke* all these words’ in 20:1.”⁴⁶

Due to the reference 2 Kgs 23:2, 21 (and its parallel in 2 Chr 34:30), the only other places in the Hebrew Bible where the “scroll of the covenant” is mentioned, Schniedewind suggests a Deuteronomic insertion between the repetition of the peoples’ responses in v. 3b and v. 7b.⁴⁷ For Schniedewind, the editorial content is marked by *Wiederaufnahme*, the repetition of a line to bridge two pieces of material or mark an editorial insertion.⁴⁸ Even if the references to writing in the chapter were added secondarily (and, based on Schniedewind’s arguments, we have some reason to believe they were), we must still come to terms with their appearance in the passage vis-à-vis the spoken commands (24:3) and sacrifice. Indeed, the presentation of YHWH’s words and judgments to the people is given twice, but it would

44. Hendel, “Sacrifice as a Cultural System,” 366–90.

45. The people do experience the terror of YHWH’s sounds (in voice or word?) on the mountain; compare with a fascinating study on the effects of sound and its religious connotations among the Ilahita Arapesh (New Guinea) by Tuzin et al., “Miraculous Voices,” 587–88.

46. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 121.

47. *Ibid.*, 124–25. For a thoughtful analysis of the connections between the writing in Exod and 2 Kgs, see Grottanelli, “Making Room for the Written Law,” 246–64.

48. *Ibid.*, 124–25. Noth’s view is still probably superior, however: “There is in any case no decisive reason for explaining the clauses about the ‘words of Yahweh’ as being a secondary literary addition, and thus we may assume that the obligation to the ‘words of Yahweh’ was a part of this covenant narrative from the beginning” Noth, *Exodus*, 198.

be incorrect to assume that the written document is necessarily elevated above the oral instructions to the people. Here, as in chapter 17, we suggest that the juxtaposition of oral and written commands (which, in the end, are probably both meant to refer to the same legal materials in chapters 20–23)⁴⁹ is intentional and gives credence to both modes of communication. The fact that the presentation first presents the oral instruction and then written reflects what was surely a pattern in the historical development of Israelite law—what was oral became written, even as the oral continued to live alongside that which is written.

During the mountaintop encounter, Moses is given only a promise regarding the two tablets: “I will give you the stone tablets with the law and the commandments which I wrote for their instruction.”⁵⁰ Why can he not receive the tablets immediately? Presumably, the instructions given in chapters 25–31 will also be written somehow, and Moses must wait until the blueprint for the tabernacle and its implements is revealed. The association of divine writing on the tablets and Moses’ writing in the passage serves to elevate Moses’ skill and responsibility to near-divine levels, while at the same time introducing an object (the “book of the covenant”) that conveys authority independent of (and even superior to) Moses.⁵¹ With the entrance of the book, Plato’s fears are realized—not only will the people be admonished by a human leader, but now also by written words which are “fixed” outside of the context of human interaction. As W. A. Graham asserts, “writing necessitates distancing of the writer from his or her readers . . . Fixing a text visually objectifies its discourse as symbols on the page and makes it possible to treat it as abstract and impersonal, an object of analysis apart from the specific, always contextual situations of oral speech.”⁵²

49. The alternation between “word and commands” and “words” could reflect the desire for variation in repeated materials within narrative. This view may be simplistic, but there is a danger in going to the other extreme as well. For example, Sarna claims the “words” are the those laws written in the apodictic style and unenforceable except through an individual’s conscience (the Decalogue and 22:17–23:19), whereas the “commands” (21:1–22:16) “fall within the scope of the coercive power of the state and the jurisdiction of law courts.” Sarna, *Exodus*, 151. Childs, on the other hand, sees a later expansion in 24:12 that “has confused the syntax”; “v. 12 has sought to combine the stone tablets which were written in the past with new teaching which were to instruct Israel in the future.” He thinks the book of the covenant in chap. 24 refers generally to “the whole corpus of Sinai laws.” Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 506.

50. Contra Sarna, the tablets are not received at this time. Sarna, *Exodus*, 153. Houtman, *Exodus*, 3:298–301, seems also to imply that the tablets are received in 24:12.

51. Childs sees this dynamic most clearly in Deuteronomy 31, where the tablets are placed into the ark; “Moses will shortly die, but his formulation of the will of God [in writing] will continue” (Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 134).

52. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 15. Here, Graham also notes that the

31:18 Written with the Finger of God

Just as a highly anthropomorphic and relatively intimate depiction of the deity is an integral aspect of chapter 24, the comment involving writing in Exodus 31:18 gives a rare peak at one of God's body parts—the finger (*'šb*).⁵³ The reference to the tablets here serves as a narrative link with chapter 24 and, among other things, helps provide a bridge to connect two narrative scenes at the mountain with the section of legal materials in between. Earlier, in Exodus 8:15, the Egyptian “magicians” (*ḥrṭmym*⁵⁴) finally recognize Israel's divine assistance and respond to the third plague (gnats/lice) by exclaiming to Pharaoh, “It is the finger of God!” or, “It is a divine finger!”⁵⁵ The specification of the finger, as opposed to the more commonly referenced hand (*yd*), is noteworthy in light of our passage.

The deity's power to act violently through his “finger” is also illustrated in a graphic battle scene from the Baal cycle (Ugarit, thirteenth century BCE).⁵⁶ Newly armed with weapons forged by Kothar wa-Hasis, Baal strikes Yamm with the club, which apparently serves as a divine extension of Baal's own hand/fingers:

The weapon leaps from Baal's hand,
like a raptor from his fingers.⁵⁷

The use of the divine finger imagery here, as sometimes in the biblical texts, is a kind of synecdoche or *pars pro toto* construction, where the finger is at least the finger but also connotes divine action and impetus. Baal's fingers are similar to the hand, but more specific, just as “raptor” (*nšr*) is more specific than “weapon.” Many of the clear iconographic representations of Baal from Ugarit elsewhere in the Levant depict Baal with the famous outstretched arm, by which the viewer can see the emphasis on the striking

“inclination of modern hermeneuts such as Paul Ricoeur to see the written text as utterly independent of its author is an extreme but logical expression of the autonomy of the written word.”

53. This incident is retold in Deut 9:10.

54. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 355, makes an interesting connection between this term and *ḥrṭ*; the *ḥrṭm* is “one possessed of occult knowledge,” i.e., the knowledge of engraving/writing.

55. Although Propp (*Exodus 19–40*, 495) translates *'lhym* as an adjective (“divine”) on the basis of Exod 9:28, Ezek 1:1, 8:3, 40:2, and Job 1:16, the phrase can be accurately rendered “finger of God,” which I prefer here.

56. For the following quotation from the Baal texts, I have followed the translation of Smith, found in Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 81–180.

57. This refrain is repeated in Col. IV.14, 16, 21, 24. Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 103–4.

power of the deity and the manner in which Baal's weapon acts as an extension of the deity's own arm/fingers.⁵⁸ Baal's violent sister, Anat, later washes her own fingers, which are covered in the blood of her vanquished enemies (Col. II.32–5).

Although YHWH's hand and arm are mentioned far more often in Exodus, with conventional descriptions such as "with a strong hand"⁵⁹ or "with an outstretched arm,"⁶⁰ the fingers have their own important place in the biblical texts. The use of the finger in cultic settings and actions is significant in the Hebrew Bible and may contribute to our understanding of the connection between writing and cult. Used specifically in reference to the "forefinger" of priests, the term 'šb' appears numerous times in Leviticus chapters 4, 8, 14, and 16 in reference to the application of blood and oil to various cultic implements and humans.⁶¹ Alternatively, fingers are invoked to describe cultic violations and misdeeds in Isa 2:8, 17:8, 59:3(?) and 58:9(?). Moreover, in Ps 8:4, the poet credits YHWH with creating the heavens, moon and stars "by the works of your fingers." N. Sarna (following Maimonides), points to finger imagery in both Psalm 8:4 and Exodus 31:18 as a way of connecting the divine writing with creation itself. Thus, "our text expresses the fundamental biblical teaching that the Ten Commandments are divine imperatives that are as much constitutive of the cosmic order as are the laws of nature."⁶²

58. In his recent study of ancient Near Eastern iconography and the Hebrew Bible, Keel's list of illustrations contain three interesting depictions of a human's (?) or divinity's (?) index finger outstretched and pointing toward various deities and cultic objects. Keel's discussion of the stela and seal does not attempt to explain the significance of the finger, but we can at least assume the appearance of the finger is important and notice that the finger could play an important role in divine and human artistic depictions in the Ancient Near East. Keel, *Goddess and Trees*, 66–67, 116; figs. 9, 112, and 113 (in "Figures for Part II and Appendices").

59. For the hand as marker of divine agency or power in Exodus, see 3:19, 4:13, 6:1, 13:9, 16:3; for human agency, Exod 9:35, 14:8, 35:29, 38:21. The classic study on the divine arm/hand as the deities' destructive power is Roberts, "The Hand of Yahweh," 244–51; see also Martens, "'With a Strong Hand and an Outstretched Arm': The Meaning of the Expression *byd hzqh wbzrw' nř wyh*," 123–41.

60. This particular phrase appears repeatedly throughout the Hebrew Bible, e.g., Exod 6:6; Deut 4:34, 5:15, 26:8; 2 Kgs 17:36; Ps 136:12; Jer 32:21; Ezek 20:33–34; compare with Pss 77:16, 89:11.

61. See, specifically, Lev 14:6–7, 25; 8:15; 14:16–27; 16:14, 19; also Num 19:4. In non-P texts, fingers appear in various ways that do not describe cultic activity or the divine finger as in Exod 31:18 or Deut 9:10; the significance of fingers as a sign of human contempt or arrogance, for example, is utilized in Prov 6:13, and as instruments of battle in Ps 144:1.

62. Sarna, *Exodus*, 206.

A fascinating and enigmatic recurrence of the writing finger occurs in Daniel 5:5, where a lavish royal feast is interrupted by the ominous appearance of a disembodied hand writing enigmatic words.⁶³ The fact that this account bears an obvious affinity with our passage in Exodus 31:18 warrants some attention. We cannot easily identify the writer in this passage, although one might assume it is an angelic figure or God himself, but “the fact that the message is written conveys a sense of finality, even of determinism.”⁶⁴ After Daniel’s interpretation is made in v. 25, even the king immediately accepts his fate—what is written cannot be undone. The court-tale could conceivably have served as a not-so-subtle reminder, to those “on the inside” (i.e., those who knew Torah in Daniel’s audience), that the God who wrote on the tablets in Exodus can still write with the divine finger, even to decree the end of an empire.⁶⁵

The issue in the Daniel passage highlights a dichotomy in apocalyptic literature between those who understand and those who do not; Daniel reads the words that the magicians cannot, emphasizing the well-established importance of writing during the later periods and the value of interpreting esoteric documents in the apocalyptic writings.

The larger context of the statement in Exodus 31:18 should also be considered in terms of the role of writing. In the set of instructions for the tabernacle and other cultic instruments immediately preceding 31:18 we find a repeated refrain: Moses is reminded on four occasions to have the tabernacle and its utensils built according to the “pattern” (or “structure,” *tbnyt*) shown to him on the mountain in ch. 25, vv. 9 and 40.⁶⁶ It is of interest to note that Moses is specifically instructed to build according to what has been *seen* (*r’h*) on the mountain—but what does Moses see? Propp offers several pieces of evidence that lend support to the idea of the *tbnyt* as a written or drawn plan, and the Mesopotamian background for a divine temple plan is often noted in the literature.⁶⁷

63. See Collins, *Daniel*, 241–55.

64. The same may be said of the “book of truth” in Dan 10:21 (*ibid.*, 250). According to Collins, the “failure to identify the writer is a deliberate artistic device. The reader is placed in the position of the king, who knows neither where the hand came from nor what the writing says” (*ibid.*, 246).

65. Despite the fact that the author seems to be mistaken about several historical issues relating to the Babylonian and Persian periods, chapters 1–6 still probably reflect earlier materials. For a list of these problematic historical references and a discussion of dating the material on these grounds, see *ibid.*, 29–33. Therefore the story in chapter 5 could have applied to Jews living any time after 586 BCE.

66. Later, in 26:30 and 27:8, different sets of terms appear, with an apparently equivalent meaning. Compare with Num 8:4; 1 Chr 28:11–19; Ezek 40–42.

67. See Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 376–77. Schniedewind believes the “simple reading”

Although separated from our account here by over a millennium, the Sumerian king Gudea's so-called "Temple Hymn" (c. 2100 BCE) provides us with an interesting correlate to the biblical tabernacle "pattern" and a divine, physical plan for the building project.⁶⁸ In a dream, Gudea (the sponsor of the hymn) sees the god Ningirsu and is instructed to rebuild the Eninnu temple complex. A woman emerges to aid in the project: "She held in her hand a stylus of shining metal, on her knees there was a tablet (with) heavenly stars" (Cyl. A, col. iv.25–26). Furthermore, a warrior appears, "who bent (his) arm holding a lapis lazuli plate on which he was setting the ground-plan of a house" (col. v.2–4).⁶⁹ However, Gudea is unable to fully comprehend the vision, and the goddess Nanše is called in to interpret. The woman with stylus is identified as Nisaba⁷⁰ (one of the patron deities of writing in the ancient Near East), and the warrior is Ninduba. Later, it is revealed that Ningirsu himself will "disclose . . . in all detail the ground-plan of his House" (col. vii.6). Unlike the "pattern" for the tabernacle in Exodus, in Gudea's account the plan is *explicitly* etched with a writing instrument (the stylus) and a divine blueprint on the lapis-lazuli plate. At the very least we can acknowledge the possibility that our authors in Exodus wanted us to understand the plans for the tabernacle as a physical object in and of themselves, or possibly even a written plan of some kind on the tablets.⁷¹

The reinterpretation and continued importance of the traditions represented in Exodus' intimate writing scenes appear clearly in a text like Prov 7:2–3, which reflects the growth of an important tradition linked with the Sinai scene. Notice the manner in which the commandments, law, writing, and even the fingers are closely connected, albeit with a more personalized effect than YHWH's thundering from Sinai or writing with his own "finger":

of 24:9–31:18 indicates the tabernacle plans, and not the legal codes, are written on the tablets described in 31:18; both are possible. These plans would also then have a parallel in the "inspired" plans for the Temple in 1 Chr 28:10–12, as well as the Mesopotamian materials. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 130–31.

68. The account comes in two major parts, written on a large clay cylinder. The relevant portions for our discussion are on Cylinder A, and are conveniently translated and discussed in Edzard, *Gudea and His Dynasty*, 68–88; Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once . . . : Sumerian Poetry in Translation*, 386–444; cf. the discussion in Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 137–39. For the following portions of the text, I have used Edzard's translation.

69. Edzard, *Gudea and His Dynasty*, 72.

70. For a helpful summary of Nisaba as patroness of writing, see Michalowski, "NISABA," 575–79.

71. Nevertheless, Propp's observation seems reasonable: "[T]he text never indicates that Moses brings [a plan] down the mountain and shows it to anyone . . . one rather gets the impression that [Moses] describes [the plan] to the craftsmen by memory." *Exodus 19–40*, 377.

“Keep my commandments and live, and my Torah as the ‘middle’ [perhaps ‘pupil,’ English idiom ‘apple’] of your eyes. Bind them upon your fingers; write them upon the tablet of your heart.”⁷²

32:15–19—34:29 The Writing Was the Writing of God

Although Exodus 32–34 contain several different references to writing, we will focus our attention on the juxtaposition between God’s writing and Aaron’s fashioning of the calf in chapter 32 as a way of understanding the broader role of writing throughout this group of texts. Moses’ descent from the mountain ends in disaster in 32:15–20; the people, led by Aaron (or perhaps it is the other way around?) create an illegitimate image, a “molten calf,” in clear violation of the command against such images earlier in 20:4. The narrator inserts a reminder (32:15–16) of the presence of the tablets—they are the “work of God,” and their writing is the “writing of God.” We also get a physical description of the tablets (they are written on “both sides,” “front and back”), which are now called “the two tablets of the Testimony (*šny lht hdt*).” Why the new terminology? These tablets are apparently the same ones promised in ch. 24, but the additional term *dt* has generated no small amount of discussion, which cannot all be rehearsed here.⁷³ B. Schwartz claims the mentioning of the *dt* (attributed to P) in 32:15 (as well as 31:18 and 34:29), in tandem with the tablets (E), is the result of an Elohist insertion into the P tradition. Certainly, the tablets, like the *dt* (if the two can be separated, as Schwartz believes), are “material evidence” of something; in the context of the impending actions in v. 19, however, it is best to view the “two tablets of the Testimony” in continuity with the earlier tablets, and thus *dt* further intensifies the role of the tablets as the “material” covenant.⁷⁴ The overt reference to the *lht* here acts as a foreboding reminder of God’s earlier

72. In a still later work, the Gospel of Luke (11:20), Jesus claims to cast out demons “by the finger of God,” demonstrating the continued feasibility of the finger-as-divine-instrument motif in first-century CE Jewish thought.

73. See evaluation and bibliography in Schwartz, “The Priestly Account of the Theophany and Lawgiving at Sinai,” 126–29; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 382–85.

74. Even if the *dt* originally stood without any reference to the tablets, we still must make sense of the fact that a) Moses was promised these tablets earlier, and b) the smashing of the tablets/*dt* signifies the “symbolic” and literal breaking of the covenant on the tablets (chapters 20–23, and possibly the blueprint for the tabernacle, as discussed above). Cf. Schwartz, “The Priestly Account of the Theophany and Lawgiving at Sinai,” 126. Propp’s view regarding the Priestly writers preference for the term *dt* in light of its resonance with other “theme words” in P’s description of the tabernacle is probably accurate and fits with our idea of the continuity of the “Testimony” within the overall tablet scheme. See Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 385.

writing in 31:18, and provides a dramatic backdrop for the smashing of the tablets in 32:19.

Upon reaching the bottom of the mountain, Moses sees the revelry described in 32:6. With great anger, “he threw the tablets [down] from his hands,⁷⁵ and smashed them at the bottom of the mountain” (32:19). Commentators have amply noted the implications of this gesture; the people have broken the covenant, perhaps even irreparably (as far as YHWH is concerned in 32:10!).⁷⁶ We must be sure to emphasize the disastrous results of the smashing in light of ancient views of writing. The breaking of the words constitutes a type of “magical” act, which destroys reality itself, and not merely a “symbol” of the covenant. The Egyptian “Execration Texts” of the early second millennium apparently functioned in this way, and one could speculate as to the intended ritual significance of “object breaking” in passages like Jeremiah 19:10–13 and 28:10–16. Although the writing activity here is not directly connected to warfare as a memorial (as it was in ch. 17), it is nevertheless interesting to note the proximity of writing to a kind of inter-group religious “war” of purification, enacted in 32:26–28 by the sons of Levi against (about) three thousand men. The smashing of the tablets in the preceding narrative, when linked with the death of several thousand transgressors in the following material, demonstrates the utterly solemn and dangerous nature of the covenant written on the tablets.

In a surprising and tense exchange following Moses’ confrontation with Aaron and the people, Moses places his own life in the path of the deity’s rage (32:32–33): “Now, if you will forgive their sin . . .⁷⁷ but if not, then erase me from your book which you have written.’ YHWH answered Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me, I will erase him from my book.’” Moses seems to know about the book, and assumes his name or existence (in a favorable sense, presumably) is recorded in it. YHWH confirms that he indeed has his own book, and that erasing will take place, though not for Moses. In a study of how the illiterate view writing in various cultures, B. Holbeck notes a belief in two kinds of “heavenly writing”—writing *in*

75. The Masoretic Text has the singular here (“from his hand”), but the intent is clearly plural (“from his hands”), as reflected in the Greek and Targums.

76. Despite his attempts at intercession in various places, Moses becomes YHWH’s rival in rashness in 32:19. In Fretheim’s words, “unlike God, Moses consults with no one and gives no explanation” for his actions here. On the significance of breaking the tablets, see Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 419; Noth, *Exodus*, 249; Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 569; Houtman, *Exodus*, 3:613–15, etc.

77. The Greek versions expand to complete the clause; see Wevers’s comment, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus*, 537.

heaven, and writing *from* heaven.⁷⁸ Moses has received writing from heaven in the form of the tablets, but we now learn that YHWH has been writing “in heaven” for some time. Although Sarna finds it “hard to decide whether or not the notion of heavenly books was taken literally in ancient Israel,” the authors record this incident with the book and names quite seriously.⁷⁹ Indeed, the Hebrew Bible speaks of such a divine book on several other occasions, including Psalms 69:28, 139:16, and Malachi 3:16 (in the New Testament, see Phil 4:3, Rev 5:1–3; in the Qurʾān, Sūrah 57:22.)⁸⁰ Although prominent among the Dead Sea Scroll communities and other later apocalyptic groups, the idea of a “divine register” has its roots in a much earlier period in the ancient Near East.⁸¹ C. Meyers notes a prominent example from Nebuchadnezzar II, where the monarch pleads to Nabû for prosperity after restoring the Ziggurat of Borsippa; as god of scribes, Nabû was thought to have held a “heavenly writing board” and could be entreated to “write” a favorable destiny for the supplicant.⁸²

Of additional interest here is the view espoused by the deity (or at least a potentially implied view) regarding personal responsibility for sin; Moses demands that he be erased (or wiped out/ blotted out, *mhh*) from the book, but YHWH laconically responds by asserting that only those who have committed sin against him will be erased. Later, however, YHWH promises to bring the peoples’ deeds back to haunt them (32:34), and then proceeds to plague them immediately anyway (v. 35). Therefore the discussion involving the book ends on an ominous note, promising danger at an unspecified future time.

After Moses pleads to see YHWH in Exodus 33, 34:1–4, 27–29 bring us back to the writing, as the covenant with Moses and Israel (mentioned in that order, interestingly) is now directly connected with the tablets in 34:27. YHWH must replace the first set of tablets, and notes with perhaps some

78. Holbek, “What the Illiterate Think of Writing,” 189.

79. Sarna, *Exodus*, 210.

80. “The appearance of many elements of these ideas in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scripture reflects the persistence and strength of the notion of a written book as the repository of divine, suprahuman knowledge or divine, heavenly decrees. The book emerges in these traditions as a physical symbol of divine as opposed to human knowledge, and hence as a tangible symbol of authority and truth.” Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 51.

81. For an illuminating discussion of the Mesopotamian mindset underlying such a belief, see Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, 97–102. See also Paul, “Heavenly Tablets and the Book of Life,” 345–53.

82. Meyers, *Exodus*, 261. A convenient collection of the iconographic depictions of Nabû holding the destiny tablet in one hand and stylus in the other can be found in Seidl, “NABŪ.B,” 24–29.

indignation that Moses has broken these (34:1). Moses cuts out new stones (34:4) and ascends the mountain, and for yet another forty-day/forty-night interval (as in 24:18–32:19) remains with YHWH atop Sinai to receive the new tablets (34:27). Despite the grammatically ambiguous pronoun in 34:28, it is YHWH who also writes this second set of tablets, regardless of the fact that Moses is told to write something in v. 27 (possibly the book of the covenant for the second time).⁸³ These objects are later placed in the ark (note the harmonized account Deut 10:1–5), as 34:29 explicitly connects the *šny lḥt h'dt* with the tablets Moses has just received and carries down from the mountain. Moses' shining face is mentioned in tandem with the carrying of the tablets, and lends authority to both Moses' divine encounter with YHWH and the objects he carries.⁸⁴ Beginning in 35:1, Moses proceeds to give the people additional (repeated) commands regarding the Sabbath and various building instructions, and we are given no indications that the words spoken are read from the tablets which seemed to play such an important role in the previous verse (34:27–29). Whether we are to assume the act of reading, or now simply see the tablets as a kind of “archival reference” is unclear.

Let us turn back, for a moment, to the heavenly writing and gold calf construction in ch. 32. Only with this description of the tablets (in tandem with the reference in 31:18) can we fully appreciate the significance of the golden calf incident and the contrast between the divine writing scene on the mountain and the events on the ground below.⁸⁵ The writing act “with the finger of God” on the *lḥt* in 31:18 and the subsequent presentation of the *lḥt* in 32:15–16 are not “redundant” or the result of “slopping editing procedures”; as Childs remarks (in reference to the chapter as a whole), a “topical scheme of contrasting scenes often dislocates the chronological sequence of

83. This view is despite the otherwise compelling analysis of C. Grottanelli, “Making Room for the Written Law,” 253, who offers no explanation for why it must be Moses who writes the second tablets. In fact, Moses must write the tablets to sustain Grottanelli's argument relating Exod 34 to 2 Kgs 22–23. The commentators, however, are in basic agreement that YHWH is the implied subject of 34:28. See Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 448; Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 604; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 617; Houtman (*Exodus*, 3:726) sees Moses as rewriting the book of the covenant, while YHWH rewrites the Decalogue.

84. For the motif of the divinity surrounded by radiance in the Hebrew Bible, see, e.g., Ezek 1:27–28, Hab 3:4, and Ps 104:2; the classic study of this motif in light of the ancient Near Eastern materials is Mendenhall's essay, “The Mask of Yahweh,” 32–68. For a related discussion, see Smith's “Near Eastern Background,” 229–39. Sarna's comments (*Exodus*, 221) are also helpful.

85. Grottanelli also notices the connections between the two scenes, but his interpretation of the Exodus materials is dominated too heavily by the stories in 1 Kgs 12 and 2 Kgs 11 and 22–23. Grottanelli, “Making Room for the Written Law,” 254–57.

the narrative.”⁸⁶ On the other hand, this “dislocation” can also contribute to the search for narrative *continuity*, as the sharp breaks between scenes and actions invite comparison between presentations which at first glance appearing jarring and unorganized. With this in mind, it is quite plausible to view Aaron’s fashioning of the calf as occurring *in the same narrative time* as the writing by God atop Sinai, and not simply in a linear sequence (i.e., first Aaron engraves, then God engraves). The author duly marks the contrasting scenes occurring on Sinai and in the camp below through the repetition of the tablets and divine writing in 31:18 and 32:15–16. *Hrwt* describes the writing of God engraved on the tablets, and the semantically-related *hrt* is cleverly used for Aaron’s fashioning of the calf.⁸⁷ Hence, while YHWH writes (*hrt*) the tablets, Aaron is simultaneously “writing” (*hrt*) the calf.⁸⁸

This comparison heightens the dramatic effect of both stories, an impression that would be partially lost without an understanding of the danger and efficacy of writing as presented throughout the book of Exodus and through the anthropological study of writing in the ancient world. The “true writing,” the divine gift of tablet and written word to Moses on Sinai, is presented in parody form in the camp, where Aaron is the ringleader of an illegitimate cultic act. While the narrator would have us believe the tablets are indeed a divine gift, or even a hitherto unmentioned act of material creation akin to the events in Genesis 1–2, we are told in explicit detail about the *actual, human origin* of Aaron’s “engraving.” In fact, the process of creating the calf is presented in a manner reminiscent of the “idol” polemics in Isaiah 44 and Jeremiah 10: the gathering of materials (Exod 32:2–3; Isa 44:14; Jer 10:3–4); the construction of the image (Exod 32:4; Isa 44:12–13, 15–17; Jer 10:9); the proclamation of worshippers (Exod 32:4, Isa 44:17), which occurs despite the fact that the people have witnessed the creation of the object (Exod 32:2–3, Isa 44:12–16, 19–20). With this in mind, it is difficult

86. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 559.

87. The Greek versions heighten the comparison between Moses’/God’s actions in writing and Aaron’s in fashioning the tool, as the terminology they use describes a writing instrument, and God’s writing is described with the exact same Greek root in v. 16. See Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus*, 519.

88. This connection renders the discussion of how Aaron could fashion a calf with a writing tool somewhat unnecessary, and it becomes evident that Propp (*Exodus 19–40*, 549–50) is incorrect to amend the Masoretic Text to read “bag” (*hryt*) in 32:4 (or, more precisely, to read *hrt* as a defectively spelled form of *hryt*). Cf. Gevirtz (“*hrt* in the Manufacture of the Golden Calf”), where a semantic connection between the use of *hrt* in the passage here and in Isa 8:1 is denied on the grounds that it does not make sense to have Aaron produce an image with a stylus. In my view, the author has sacrificed this need to “make sense” to compare the tablets and the calf. To his credit, Propp (*Exodus 19–40*, 450) provides alternate ways of understanding the reference, as either a design sketched on a hard surface or a wooden image chiseled and then overlaid in gold.

to imagine Aaron's words in 32:24 ("I threw it in the fire, and out came this calf") as anything but a shrewd mockery of the idol construction process.⁸⁹

Ultimately, then, the story in chapter 32 gives us a glimpse into the struggle to define not only the proper worship of YHWH—although that is certainly at stake—but also the true *physical representation* of YHWH and his activity in the world. This struggle does not fit into a simplistic one-to-one correlation with Jeroboam's religious program in the north during the tenth century BCE (1 Kgs 12:28), but is rooted in a real historical struggle that stands at the base of the book of Exodus itself, the struggle to define the nature of God and the proper response of the covenant people. If the tablets of the Torah serve as the correct image of God for the narrator, in contradistinction to the calf, then the authors have attempted to show that the writing and the tablets are an authentically divine creation, bestowed upon the worthy servant Moses by a God who not only creates, forgives, fights, and kills, but also a God who writes words and, in a very real sense, authors the destinies of his people through the written laws which they are to follow on the tablets.⁹⁰

We can affirm K. van der Toorn's basic arguments about the Torah as an image of veneration in later Judaism, akin to the Mesopotamian images: both have a putatively divine origin, and both are tangible symbols of the divine presence.⁹¹ But the story in Exodus 32 suggests the tablets were thought to function in this way at an earlier period in the tradition, at least in the tenth century BCE. Still, despite the compelling arguments in favor of a literary connection between Exodus 32 and 1 Kings 12, the struggle to define YHWH's image surely occurs earlier than Jeroboam's tenth-century actions, and we should resist the temptation to uncritically read 2 Kings 12 back into Exodus as if Exodus 32 is a desperate attempt to ground Jeroboam's "apostasy" in another period. Indeed, the stories as we now have them do present Moses' and God's authorship as a part of a "venerable," "mythological"

89. These points comport with Cross's view on the Mushite/Aaronid competition for the priesthood. See Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 198–200. Cross sees two presentations of Aaron's infidelity, the first in the beginning of chapter 32 and the second 32:26–29, where "Moses' allies are Levitical priests, confronting the idolaters, at whose head stands Aaron!" (200).

90. These views are basically in line with those of Demsky (*Writing in Ancient Israel*, 19), who writes the following regarding the prohibition of images in the Ten Commandments: "It is most instructive that this opposition to an iconographic object of veneration is expressed in the written tablets of the covenant, which themselves became the new sacred symbol and tangible sign of His presence . . . The medium of writing therefore provided the solution of the problem how to represent physically an invisible and transcendent deity."

91. Van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book," 229–48.

past, “similar to the antediluvian era which the Babylonians regarded as the Golden Age of images,” but this characterization *per se* would not prevent us from attempting to understand the complex socio-religious realities of the book before the final composition of the Deuteronomistic History.⁹²

28:11, 36; 39:14, 30: Engrave Signet Engravings Upon It

One additional note should be made regarding the inscribing of various cultic implements in Exodus 28 and 39. The author (and thus presumably his intended audience) seems to understand basic signet/seal technology, and the assumption that the craftsmen will be able to carry out the work assumes a certain level of literacy for the characters in the scenario envisioned by the biblical author.⁹³ The names and phrases (*qdš lyhwh*, “Holy to YHWH”) are not mere decorative tokens. In these passages, our connection of writing and cult receives direct expression: When Aaron “bears the names” of the sons of Israel before YHWH (Exod 28:12), he carries with him the physical existence of the people into the divine presence; when Aaron wears the crown (*š ys*) of gold upon his forehead, inscribed with “Holy to YHWH,” he is made ritually fit to bear the burdens of the congregation and to appear acceptable before YHWH (28:38). As Niditch correctly asserts, “more than a reminder, more than a symbol, the writing helps to remake Aaron in a visceral and real sense.”⁹⁴

CONCLUSIONS

The presence of writing in the book of Exodus must be considered not only for its contribution to the narrative as story, but also as a witness to several key socio-political issues (such as the interplay of textuality and orality in ancient Israel), for the role of writing in the history of Israel’s religion, and for the struggle to define, through several centuries and editorial layers, the nature of YHWH’s “true image” in the world. The presence of “the book” itself may well have served an especially important iconic role during the loss of political autonomy in the nascent Second Temple period. We certainly

92. *Ibid.*, 244.

93. Carr considers the head craftsmen who are to do this engraving to possess “at least basic literacy” and concludes (after citing several other examples, e.g., Josh 18:4; 1 Sam 10:25; Isa 8:1; Num 5:23, etc.) that “writing is not confined to scribes *per se* but is thoroughly intertwined with social structures in the poetic and narrative worlds of the Hebrew Bible.” *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 118.

94. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 86.

see this dynamic represented in Nehemiah 8, for example, where the “book of the law of Moses” serves to revive national customs (vv. 14–18) in a period of social instability.

The connections between writing and the origins of the organized cult throughout Exodus should not be ignored. We may even go so far as to suggest the possibility that ritual writing played a significant role in the early forms of worship, a role that was later replaced in later periods with Torah readings and exposition in the Synagogue (a practice adopted by the early Christian church). Others have shown the viability of ritual writing in temple settings (for example, in Roman religion⁹⁵), and certainly Numbers 5 alludes to at least one form of ritualized writing in the tabernacle. We can even discern a simple pattern of actions in the Exodus passages where writing and sacrifice occur together (17:14–16, 24:4–6, and even 32:4–6, where Aaron’s “writing” is the fashioning of the calf before the sacrifice) which comports with the pattern in Numbers 5:16–31: writing immediately precedes sacrifice. Further study would need to be made into the ancient Near Eastern materials to see if there is enough evidence to sustain such a claim, however.

The authors clearly sought to fuse the sense of awe and power often connected with writing in their ancient context to the Sinai complex in such a way as to reinforce the drama and gravity of the holy encounter at the mountain. The manner in which writing is treated in Exodus would surely have been viewed favorably by later scribal cultures in the Persian period, when the process of collecting the Torah into something that would become a canon began. Indeed, the very prestige with which the physical act of writing is portrayed in Exodus at Sinai enhances—either intentionally or inadvertently—the prestige of the final textual product of the entire Sinai narrative, and, by extension, the written Hebrew Bible itself in its canonical form. Even though we will not be able to conclusively rule out the notion that the sense of awe surrounding the writing acts in Exodus (and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible) is in fact the late *product* of an early Jewish scribal culture, the events of the Exodus narrative itself point to an older and more complex history of transmission, where the repeated emphasis on writing indicates the act was viewed as abnormal and even inherently sacred.

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