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Writing, Affordances, and Governable Subjects

Abstract

The book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible makes a number of references to writing and to the importance of Israel carefully observing the commands, statutes, and ordinances written in the book. Readers can then conform themselves and their behaviors according to the subjectivity of Israel the book sets forth. The process of conforming oneself to what is written in a book makes use of particular affordances of writing, a technology that was becoming more widespread at the time Deuteronomy was being written. The materiality of the book and the social uses to which writing and books could be put are being realized in Deuteronomy in order to create people as particular subjects called "Israel."

Keywords

Writing, Affordances, Subjectivity, Deuteronomy, Technology

Biography

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In the Hebrew Bible book of Deuteronomy, writing and the creation of texts is a widely shared activity. The deity writes, Moses writes, the people write, the (future) king is to have writing done for him. The material form this writing takes varies. The deity writes on stone tablets (9:10; 10:2), while Moses writes on a scroll (31:19, 24), the king has a copy of "this Torah" written for him so he can read it all his days (17:18–19), men write bills of divorce (24:1, 3), and the people write on doorposts, gates, plastered stones, and their "hearts" (6:9; 11:20; 27:3, 8). Writing gives material form to the commands, statutes, and ordinances of the deity and Moses, and it creates a path, *derek*, the people are to follow. This command path, as it were, is special, and readers are warned not to deviate from it (5:32; 17:11, 20; 28:14).

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The metaphor of a path being fashioned from the commands, statutes, and ordinances expresses one of the important features of writing and books in religious traditions, or at least within this religious tradition. Writing creates governable subjects, in the sense of being subjects whose behavior is shaped by it. In the case of Deuteronomy, these subjects, called "Israel", are loyal and docile subjects, obedient to what is written in the book. Their subjectivity is created in relationship to the book itself, as the path that sets out the practices and experiences individuals must enact in order to become the "Israel" of the book. This is achieved in part by affordances, or possibilities, writing offered to the writers of Deuteronomy that they then employed for Israel's subjectivity. For many today, these affordances might seem obvious, but writing was a relatively new technology at the time Deuteronomy was being written. The possibilities of this technology took time to be realized and used. Deuteronomy provides evidence of that process.

My argument begins with a brief discussion of affordances and the history of writing in ancient Israel. From this discussion I consider three of writing's affordances of particular import in creating Israel's subjectivity: fixing and stabilizing the commands, standardizing and normalizing them for Israel and its conduct, and using them in assessment mechanisms. Writing and texts seek to create certain types of subjects in religious traditions, even before they shape other religious practices and performances.

Affordances and the Invention of Hebrew

What is an affordance? James Gibson used the term to speak of those things in a physical environment that are offered (or, afforded) to an animal within it. Affordance refers to the relationship that exists between an animal and its environment, the complementarity of animal and environment.[1] That environment offers to the animal a set of possibilities for action that may be used and modified in certain ways. Affordances are not determinative of an animal's actions, but rather are possibilities to be realized.

Gibson's idea quickly was adapted to different contexts and uses, across a range of fields. I draw upon it with respect to writing and books to recognize that these technologies are part of social life, what I consider the environment of human life, both in the present day and in antiquity. Writing offers

1 Gibson 2015, 119.

humans a set of possible uses.[2] For instance, a printed book offers me the opportunity of reading the ideas and arguments of a scholar to whom I have no other access, but it also might serve as a useful paperweight or doorstop. The first use might appear to be the "natural" use of a book, but it is an affordance of writing, because the fixed and standardized form of those ideas becomes available to me in a different time and space. The second is a use of the book in a particular circumstance, one most writers do not intend.

It is the governmental possibilities of writing and books for Israel's subjectivity in Deuteronomy that are my concern in this article. Writing and the texts produced by it offered the writers a set of possibilities that were relatively new in history, a result of what Seth L. Sanders calls "the invention of Hebrew".[3] Sanders argues that written Hebrew, a vernacular language, developed in the 8th–6th centuries BCE and was put to a variety of uses beyond those of a royal administration or temple complex and its concerns (annals, records, and the like).[4] These included the processes that led to the writing of the books of the Hebrew Bible, which not only recorded oral narratives but also provided a mechanism by which communities could be formed.

The historical context Sanders describes for how Hebrew came into use in ancient Israel is the one within which the book of Deuteronomy was formed. Most scholars place the core of the book, chapters 12–26, in the late 7th century BCE and associate it with the "book of the law" that inspired the reforms of King Josiah (2 Kings 22:3–23:25).[5] The rest of the book came together in the 6th century BCE.[6] Writing as a technology was becoming part of the writers' environment as Deuteronomy developed. The affordances of this new technology therefore were on offer to them as they worked. Another resource of the environment that they appropriated and used was the so-called suzerainty treaty, a diplomatic form from ancient Near Eastern international relations, where a dominant power (the suzerain) entered into a formal agreement with

2 Heidi Overhill provides a succinct summary of the adaptation of Gibson's term across different disciplines and the categories of affordance theory that developed. My use here corresponds with social affordance, of a cascading variety. Overhill 2012, 1–4.

3 Sanders 2009.

4 Sanders 2009, 125–30.

5 This view goes back to the work of W. M. L. de Wette in 1805. More recent proposals date the core of the book to the first half of the 7th century (e. g. Otto 2012, 2016; Steymans 1995). For overviews of the history of scholarship on Deuteronomy, see e. g. Christensen 2001, lxviii–lxx; Tigay 1996, xix–xiv; Edenburg and Müller 2019.

6 I use the term "book" for convenience. Deuteronomy refers to itself as a scroll, *spr*, one of the technologies of that time. The codex, or book, is a later technology.

a foreign subordinate power (the vassal).[7] Deuteronomy's literary form has this same literary form, so scholars understand Israel's deity, YHWH, to be the dominant party and Israel to be the subservient one.

Fixing and Stabilizing

Sanders understands Deuteronomy to be an example of the mechanism by which communities are formed. It represents a community "called into existence through the circulation of texts", a result of texts' ability to create political communities or political belonging.[8] Sanders explains the community-forming abilities of Deuteronomy in terms of its rhetorical effects. The Shema, "Hear, O Israel, …" (6:4), is a command directed to readers and listeners. He argues that this effect remains persuasive, as people still hear themselves being addressed by it.[9] They understand themselves to be this Israel. I agree, because the rhetoric of the book *is* effective. But I think the technology of writing and its affordances are just as important, if not more so, in the process of creating a community called "Israel".[10]

The circulation of written texts, mentioned by Sanders, is one such affordance. But in order for a text to be circulated, it must be written down. That process is what realizes another affordance, of fixing and stabilizing ideas and narratives.[11] When knowledge and ideas are written, they are given a physical manifestation with a particular form, order, and vocabulary. When they write, writers make decisions about what they are writing and how to write it. They determine the way(s) they want ideas and knowledge to be expressed, in what order, with which words. Self-consciously or not, they make a commitment on these aspects, shaping knowledge and ideas in a particular way. This process differs from oral communication, in which ex-

7 For more on this form and its use in Deuteronomy, see Weinfeld 1992; Steymans 1995; Otto 2012, 2016; Lauinger 2013.

8 Sanders 2009, 10.

9 Sanders 2009, 1.

10 The Hebrew Bible offers different, competing notions of Israel as a community. Sanders' claim speaks to only one such configuration or notion, as does my argument in this article.

11 I credit David Carr with the terminology of fixing and stabilizing, due to a personal communication with him in Denver, Colorado in May 2018. See his more considered thoughts on this aspect of writing in Carr 2011, especially chapter 5. Carr uses the terminology of standardization, not stabilization.

pression, word choice, or order are more fluid, varying in each performative event.

By fixing and stabilizing ideas and knowledge, writing also preserves them in a certain form. Once given that form, words and ideas can endure, transcending time and place.[12] Thousands of clay tablets from ancient Mesopotamia have been discovered in recent decades. The ideas and knowledge they contain is now available to others in very different times and places. The knowledge they contain, in its original form, remains available to others. This is not to say, however, that what was written is something that was standardized and normalized. These processes are part of another affordance of writing.

Standardizing and Normalizing

Something can be written down and then revised, erased, destroyed, or otherwise discarded. It can be lost. What is required for writing to become standardized and normalized is social use. It must become part of social practice. Circulating texts between and among persons and communities is one practice whereby a text becomes standardized. The same text is shared, read, or performed, and thereby conveys the same words, in the same form and vocabulary, beyond the context in which it was written. Copying a text, whether once or repeatedly, creates the original text as a standard. Storing a text and later retrieving it in order to read it is another practice by which that text becomes a standard. The type and variety of social practices by which a text is created as a standard are large, but reuse must occur. Writing something does not automatically mean what is written becomes standardized. Reuse is not a foregone conclusion for a text. It requires conscious action. Thus, standardization is an affordance of writing, something offered by writing and texts but not required. It must be realized through practice.

Normalization is closely related to standardization, but different. Perhaps it is best to think of these as two points on a spectrum of behavior. Standardization involves the use of a text *as text*. It is text-focused, as written artifact. Normalization involves how the behavior of individuals and groups is shaped by written texts. Its focus is conduct as shaped by a (standardized) text. The Decalogue (or Ten Commandments; Exod. 20; Deut. 5) is normative because it

12 So Sonnet 1997, 109, 146. See also Olson 1994, 135.

was used to shape communal and individual behavior.[13] Normalization happens within a larger apparatus of government, that is, a system of mechanisms and techniques that seeks to shape people's behavior toward certain ends. Writing offers the possibility of being used normatively, but it is an affordance that must be realized.

Assessment and Truth

Written words do not require assessment, neither of the words themselves nor of those who make use of them. But once texts become standardized and normalized, assessment becomes possible through some sort of mechanism of evaluation. Assessment can be performed on the behaviors of those individuals governed by texts or on a text itself. Texts, for example, can be compared with one another, revised, edited, re-organized, and altered in any number of ways.[14] Likewise, behaviors of individuals may be assessed through mechanisms of comparison and evaluation. Conduct may be examined, compared with what is written in (normative) texts about such behavior, evaluated, judged, then rewarded or penalized, praised or condemned, encouraged or modified. Mechanisms of assessment reinforce the affordance of standardization and normalization because they make use of standardized texts, which record and preserve certain ideas that function socially to govern how individuals are to conduct themselves. These mechanisms become governmental operations, influencing and guiding behaviors while also offering a means whereby individuals and groups can learn the truth about themselves. A simple yes-or-no truth game makes this possible: Did I act correctly? Did we behave as we are supposed to in this circumstance? These are instances of governmentality, intersections of technologies of the self (do individuals conform their conduct, singly and collectively, to what is written in certain texts?) and technologies of power (shaping behavior according to particular texts) that create and govern subjects.

13 Modern debates and disputes about Ten Commandment monuments in the United States offer present-day examples of a type of normativity associated with writing and texts. Among the more notable such debates is the placement of a Ten Commandments monument in the Montgomery, Alabama courthouse lobby by Judge Roy Moore. Kraft 2008.

14 Carr's arguments about the processes that led to the formation of the Bible could be characterized as describing ancient mechanisms of assessment; Carr 2011.

Deuteronomy's Subjects

In Deuteronomy, the writers appropriate these three affordances to shape conduct and create Israel as a particular type of subject. Remember that writing was a relatively new technology at the time, one they and others presumably were learning about, including its affordances. During a period of empires and imperial governance, these writers made Israel the subject of their writing, rather than imperial matters and concerns.

Narratively, Deuteronomy is presented as a series of four speeches delivered by Moses to the assembled people of Israel on the eastern shores of the Jordan river (1:1). This feature of the text helps create in readers the sense they also are present as Moses speaks his words, that, as Sanders notes, they continue to understand themselves as the ones being addressed by Moses.[15] As readers encounter these speeches, they learn what it means to be "Israel" from the book: how to act, live, sacrifice, build, punish, behave in times of war, and treat war captives, what to do when entering Canaan, how to be blessed or cursed for (non-)observance of the words of Deuteronomy. They do so through the medium of writing. Moses is not delivering his speeches to the reader directly; his speeches are preserved in writing.[16] This is a realization of the affordance of writing. The affordance of fixing and stabilizing words a certain way enables individuals in other times and places to read them. The written speeches may be copied, circulated, used, and reused. These actions are made possible by this affordance, which contributes, in turn, to the social understanding that the texts record and preserve the words of a specific person, who spoke them in a particular time and place.[17] This understanding is encouraged by the narratives themselves, in several ways.

The deity models the fixing and stabilizing of words in writing. Twice the deity is presented as writing down words to preserve them for Israel, since Moses breaks the first set of stone tablets (4:13; 5:22; 10:2, 4).[18] Moses also models this affordance. He speaks to the people the words the deity gave him

15 The impression that Deuteronomy records actual historical events also is created, but such historicity is greatly debated.

16 Sonnet's arguments (Sonnet 1997) about the book within the book and the two levels of the book, that of the plot and that of the narrator, provide one of the more widely accepted explanations of the relationship between speech and writing in Deuteronomy.

17 This is another effect of fixing and stabilizing: what is written can be understood as a record of an event, even if fictive.

18 Divine writing is not as fixed or stable as one might assume.

on the mountain, then writes them down as the words of Torah (31:9). When YHWH gives him words of a song to teach to the people (31:19), Moses writes them down, then teaches them to Israel (31:22). The writers of Deuteronomy make use of the affordance of fixing and stabilizing words to create a certain relationship between the written text and readers. They present the content of the book as a record of what Moses said to Israel at a certain point in time. The book is both speech and writing. All the "spoken" words would be lost to time if not written down, but writing allows them to transcend time, place, speaker, audience, and context.[19] The affordance of fixing and stabilizing words and ideas in writing becomes the reliable means of transmitting Moses' words into the future.

Sanders' arguments about Hebrew being used in non-royal contexts are helpful here for thinking about writing as a technology. Assuming that by the 5th century BCE Deuteronomy was coming into a shape much like what we have today, this scroll would have appeared at a time when, Sanders argues, Hebrew was being used in contexts other than those of state bureaucracies and thus was not reserved for what might be classified as royal use.[20] As people in Israel learned to write and explored what might be done with this technology, they realized it offered the opportunity to fix and stabilize words and ideas and to share them.[21] This is a period in which orality remained important, even as writing emerged and was more widely used. By presenting Moses as speaking to the people and then writing down his words himself (31:9), the writers of Deuteronomy connected speech to writing and implied what is written is the same as what is spoken. The affordance of fixing and stabilizing words allows that speech to transcend time and place.

The affordance of standardization and normalization is realized in Deuteronomy in several ways. One of the clearest examples is when the deity is portrayed as re-writing the words recorded on stone tablets. Readers are assured in the text that YHWH writes "the same words as before" (10:4; NRSV). Writing offers the possibility of standardization: the same words, in the same order, are reproduced from one instance to the next. It comes as no surprise, then, that the future sovereign is to have a copy of "this Torah" written for

19 So also Sonnet 1997, 109. See also 146. Cf. Olson 1994, 135.

20 I consider the Masoretic text form to represent that shape, as do others, e. g. Tigay 1996, xxv; Nelson 2002, 8–9. As Karel van der Toorn argues, this shape likely was set by the end of the 5th century BCE (Toorn 2007, 144–45, 151).

21 Lachish Letter 3 provides evidence of this happening in this time period (early 6th century, c.597 BCE), as Sanders argues (Sanders 2009, 144).

his use, so he may have it to read from for all his days (17:19). "This Torah" is a standardized text to be copied. That understanding is created and enhanced by Moses' repeated references to "this Torah," *hatorah hazeh*.[22] They create the idea that what is written is consistent with what he spoke to Israel in the past, since the narrative presents him as writing it down. Because standardized as "this Torah", they are what the people have read to them every seventh year during the festival of Booths (31:10–11). They are what the people write on a plastered monument on Mount Ebal (27:1–4, 8). The writers take advantage of the affordance of standardization in a variety of ways, thereby shaping Israel's self-understanding and its actions.

It is in the ways writing shapes behavior that its normative possibilities are realized. Because the texts offer themselves to be used as norms of behavior, they influence Israel's conduct, governing it. Moses makes clear "this Torah" also is normative for Israel's life. The stone tablets are preserved within the ark (10:5). The king reads his copy of "this Torah" in order to learn the fear of YHWH and monitor (*shmr*) himself and his behavior so he is in compliance with it (17:19–20). The people are to internalize the words of Torah by writing them on their doorposts and gates (6:9; 11:20; writing governs individuals' behaviors where they live). They are to learn these words and monitor (*shmr*) their behaviors to ensure compliance with them (e. g. 4:5–6; 5:1; 31:12). The people are to enact, do, and thus put into practice the commands of Moses and YHWH (e. g. 12:1, 32; 15:5; 26:16) in their own lives and conduct and those of their household and in relationship with others. These words are the path Israel is to follow carefully, without leaving it (4:2; 5:32; 12:32; 17:11, 20; 28:14). The written words are normative for Israel, governing its conduct and shaping individuals as subjects to what is written.

Finally, by cautioning readers and listeners against deviating from the book's path, the affordance of assessment is realized. How many pilgrimage festivals are there for Israel? Check Deuteronomy (16). What food should Israelites eat? Check Deuteronomy (14). As a path, Deuteronomy can be used by individuals to determine if they have veered off it. They can check the book, compare it with their conduct, and assess whether the book and their conduct align. An evaluation mechanism is created by using the book for assessment purposes. The book defines what it means to be "Israel", at least for the writers of Deuteronomy. Individuals can evaluate their conduct through comparison with it. This, in turn, makes possible another potentiality of writing: determining the

22 Deut 1:5; 4:8; 17:18–19; 27:3, 8, 26; 28:58, 61; 29:20, 28 [ET 21, 29]; 30:10; 31:9, 11–12, 24, 26; 32:46.

truth about oneself and Israel. A game of truth is created, with a binary (yes/no) structure. Each individual's behavior can be compared with the book, to assess it and judge whether it is in agreement with what is written. The book is, in the language of the book itself, a witness against Israel (31:19, 21, 26, 28; 32:46), able to determine the "truth" about Israel and each individual who understands themselves to be such a subject.

Conclusion

Since at least the time of Josephus, interpreters have argued Deuteronomy is Israel's "constitution" (*politeia*) or, more recently, "polity".[23] Such arguments have focused on the institutions and practices by which Israel is organized. But the governmental functions of the book do more than this. They shape and guide (i.e. govern) how individuals come to be Israel as a subject and subject position. The affordances of writing are one means by which this occurs. Because the commands are fixed in writing, the same understanding of Israel becomes available to each and every individual who considers themself part of Israel and addressed by the commands. The same practices and behaviors are incumbent upon all of Israel because Deuteronomy is a standard and norm of what it means to be Israel, an affordance provided by writing and the book. When individuals shape their thinking and selves according to the commands, statutes, and ordinances written in the book, they enact Israel's subjectivity and become subjects to the book. The government of the book, in other words, is concerned not only with institutions and the organization of Israel's society, but also with the creation of Israel as a people and with how individuals recognize themselves as part of this subjectivity. The affordance of assessment provides a means for evaluating oneself and others and the extent to which the examined behaviors correspond with those recorded in the book. Determining the truth about Israel becomes possible. In all these ways, writing and the book are not simply a constitution of (or for) Israel, in a nominal understanding of this term, but also constitute Israel, a verbal understanding.

I argued at the beginning of this article that the Israel created by Deuteronomy is a loyal and docile subject. The writers' appropriation of the suzerainty

23 Josephus 1930, Book IV, §198, 96; Christensen 2001, lvii; McBride 1987, 229–44. Bernard M. Levinson argues *politeia* should be translated as "form of government", not "constitution", although most other scholars do not adopt this translation alternative. Levinson 2008, 56–57.

treaty form as the model (standard) for Deuteronomy suggests that Israel's subjectivity is as the subordinate power. To be Israel is to be a loyal, docile subject.[24] In examining the affordances of writing that are taken advantage of in Deuteronomy, some of the practical ways in which this subjectivity is created become evident. These affordances are something of a commonplace now, aspects of writing and books so widely accepted they are deemed "normal" or "natural" and therefore not worth examining. Yet for the writers of Deuteronomy, the technology of writing was relatively new, something to be accepted and used, adapted and explored in order to learn what might be possible with it.

I end by noting that what is past is present. What I mean by this is that a digital revolution is underway, one that presents affordances to users and that shapes subjectivity in new ways. Considering a familiar technology with a long social history offers a perspective from which to analyze the digital revolution. The government of people is facilitated by the affordances of technology, digital and otherwise. This is not because technologies are deterministic or because a particular use of them is inherent and inevitable; it is, rather, because users realize those affordances and possibilities, take advantage of them, and use them for certain goals or purposes. As Bernard Stiegler has argued, such is as it ever has been for humans with technology: we find ways to use it and to put it to new, different uses.[25] This was the case for writing and books, as Deuteronomy demonstrates. It is the case for digital technologies too.

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24 There are many ways by which this goal or end is pursued in the book, which I explore in my forthcoming book, *Deuteronomy's Subject*.

25 Stiegler, 1998.

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