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Abstract: This essay probes the origins of iconic textuality in the ancient Near East, informed by post-colonial perspectives on iconic texts. The surviving art and texts from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia exhibit at least four forms of iconic textuality: monumental inscriptions, portraits of scribes, displays and manipulations of ritual texts, and beliefs in heavenly texts. The spread of literacy did not displace the social prestige of scribal expertise that was established in antiquity. The every-growing number and complexity of texts accounts for the continuing cultural authority of scholarly expertise. The tension between expert and non-specialist uses of texts, however, explains scholarship's avoidance of the subject of iconic books and texts while drawing constant attention to their semantic interpretation instead.

Ancient Iconic Texts and Scholarly Expertise

Contemporary cultures provide many examples of iconic books and texts. For four year, the *Iconic Books Blog* has chronicled their appearances in news media and other internet sources. Its entries show that iconic textuality takes diverse forms and serves to legitimize political, religious, educational and various other cultural institutions, as well as individuals. That observation is confirmed by evidence from comparative scriptures studies, cultural anthropology and book history that has stimulated several recent explorations of the typical functions of iconic books in comparison with other uses of texts (Myrvold 2010; and in this volume: Watts, Chapter 1; Graham, Chapter 2; Stam, Chapter 3; Parmenter, Chapter 4).

In contrast to this rich lode of iconic textuality available from contemporary cultures, historical investigations of the subject must struggle with gaps in the evidence that grow larger the further back one looks. They also risk imposing anachronistic models of textuality, or iconicity, on people and practices for which they are inappropriate. However, historical analysis can provide explanations for cultural features and functions that examination of contemporary practices may miss. Historical distance can provide perspective to better understand the overall phenomenon iconic books and texts. A historical survey provides a promising avenue for explaining, first, the persistence of certain forms of iconic textuality and, second, the refusal of traditional scholarship to recognize and study it. A historical perspective not only draws attention to this long-standing lacuna in scholarship, but also finds its motivation in the commitment of humanistic scholarship to the semantic dimension of texts. This essay traces these issues back to the first cultures to adopt writing on a large scale, the civilizations of the ancient Near East. I describe four kinds of ancient iconic textuality and then consider social power that they convey, in order to lay the basis for explaining why historians have usually ignored the significance and influence of iconic texts.

Iconic Textuality in the Ancient Near East

The surviving artifacts and texts from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia exhibit at least four forms of iconic textuality. The most obvious is the monumental royal inscription. Throughout the Near East, rulers commemorated their victories and donations on stone, often of monumental size and expense. In Egypt, kings covered almost every temple wall with texts, most of which were brightly painted in chromatic colors. In these ancient cultures where the vast majority of people were illiterate, including most of the kings and aristocrats themselves, the primary purpose of monumental texts was not communication. Though scribes no doubt made themselves readily available in temples and courts to read the walls and stelae to interested parties for a fee, the politics motivating the massive expense of producing texts in this form and on this scale required no translation by experts: the look of the texts as much as their contents equated textual knowledge with power and wealth. Their production and display claimed political legitimacy for the king and his regime (Liverani 1995).

A second obvious form of iconic textuality can be found in ancient art depicting scribes plying their trade. Such scenes appear fairly often in tableaus of agricultural or military life. Egyptian funerary art also contains many prominent portraits of scribes, or at least the deceased portrayed as scribes. Here we find already a phenomenon common in later cultures: portraiture depicting people holding texts or surrounded by texts in order to characterize their educational

achievements and their authority in transmitting and interpreting the literary tradition. The images of texts in their hands claim scholarly legitimacy for them, just as do displays of faculty books in universities today (see Kinnard's footnote 1, p. 152 of this volume). When ancient kings could not plausibly claim scribal skills themselves, they could show themselves in the company of the scribes in their employ to lay claim to the same traditions of textual authority and legitimacy.

These two forms of iconic textuality are not limited to the ancient Near East or to cultures that have developed from it. For example, artifacts from the classical Maya of Central America also prominently feature monumental texts celebrating royal achievements and memorial sculptures of scribes plying their trade. Iconic ritualizations of texts in these unrelated agricultural societies probably fulfilled similar social and political functions.

Literary references to two more forms of iconic textuality have been preserved in ancient Near Eastern texts. Kings and priests frequently displayed and manipulated ritual texts to legitimize how rituals were performed (Watts 2005). Royal and temple commemorative inscriptions mention such practices while recording compliance with the instructions found in old texts. When restoring temples, texts were often found buried in their foundations to preserve the "original" designs of the gods. In Egypt, responsibility for ensuring compliance with ritual texts was delegated to specialists, the priests "who hold the ritual." Ceremonial art regularly depicts them holding high the scroll in which the ritual instructions were written. They kept these ritual texts in a temple library or archive, called by Egyptians the "house of life," and strictly limited access to them. Later centuries increasingly credited authorship of such ritual and omen texts to gods of wisdom—Ea in Mesopotamia and Thoth in Egypt (Rothberg-Halton 1984; Schott 1972). Egyptian scribal portraits sometimes depict their subjects writing at the inspiration of Thoth. Thus in ritual and in art, texts were displayed and manipulated to legitimize rituals and the priests who presided over them.

Ancient myths showed a particular interest in a fourth kind of iconic text, namely heavenly texts written by gods. Mesopotamian traditions conceived of the gods assembling annually on New Year's Day to determine the fates for the coming year (Paul 1973). The scribal goddess (Nisaba) or god (Nabu) recorded their decisions with a silver stylus on tablets of blue lapis lazuli. In other words, they wrote with the stars of the sky (Parmenter 2009a). The huge corpus of Mesopotamian omen literature sprang from this conception of the stars and all of nature as a book in which the gods write their decisions regarding human fate (Dalley 1999, 166). The omen series occupied the peak of the educational curriculum, mastered only by the best and most privileged scribes. From omen texts they learned to *read nature like a text*. This conception of nature as text motivated the Mesopotamian's exhaustive records of the omens they observed. Subsequent cultures have continued to view nature as a text to be read, a metaphor that inspires much of modern empirical science (see e.g. Kosso 1992, 5-7). It provides mythic legitimation for the interpretive enterprise that underlies all scholarly disciplines.

But not all divine texts could or should be shared with humans. Several prominent myths depict the record of the gods' decisions not just in the sky or in nature but as a material text, though of course of a heavenly kind. It consists of tablets, often called "the Tablets of Destinies," whose possession grants supreme power and kingship among the gods. The Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, features the tablets as a minor element in its plot (Foster 2005, 436-86). The

primordial mother goddess, Tiamat, bestows them on her choice to be king of the gods, but after defeating her, Marduk takes them away. His victory makes him king of the gods, with obvious political implications for Babylon, the city that he patronized. In the *Anzu* epic, the tablets play a more central role in the plot (Foster 555-78). Here the traditional high god, Enlil, who usually wears the tablets on a string, is tricked into taking them off in order to bathe. The supernatural bird Anzu steals them and thereby gains power to thwart every attempt by any god to get them back. Ultimately, the young deity Ninurta kills Anzu by trickery, but then refuses to return the tablets to Enlil. He claims them and kingship for himself.

Though many cylinder seals depict scenes from these myths, the Tablets of Destiny appear nowhere in extant Mesopotamian art. On reflection, that is not very surprising. The Tablets are heavenly texts, never meant for human eyes. They are therefore the paradigmatic occult texts. To reproduce them in art would be to infringe on that supreme divine prerogative. (In fact, one thing that distinguishes images of texts from other kinds of images is that while an image of a person produces only a likeness, a realistically detailed image of a text reproduces at least part of the text itself.)

So these stories depict the Tablets of Destiny as magical devices that give their owners power over heaven and earth. This brings me to my second major point, about the social power of iconic texts. It is tempting to characterize the function of these stories as serving to mystify omen texts, as perpetuating a misunderstanding of a text's nature. Omen texts *really* functioned as sources of information to the scribes who read them and who used that information to try to interpret the course of events around them. Though we may find their reasoning and conclusions flawed, we recognize the work of ancient scholars as similar to our own: they interpreted the semantic meaning of texts in search of information that they could use, just as we do. *We think* that reading alone transmits the text's influence and authority. Stories of magic tablets simply obscure the fact that limiting access to literacy and education reinforces social stratification.

That is of course true, so far as it goes. But Philip Arnold (1995, 2002) and Vincent Wimbush (2011) point out that indigenous and colonized peoples recognize the iconic power of colonizing texts in ways that the conquerors who wield them often do not. I want to apply that observation to ancient ideas about heavenly texts. What cultural reality in the experiences of non-scholars did these myths address? Where in the experience of ancient Near Eastern peoples did texts ever function in the way that the Tablets of Destiny do in *Enuma Elish* and *Anzu*?

As it turns out, texts were frequently the prizes and/or victims of military conflict in the Ancient Near East, just as they are in these myths. Conquerors erased or usurped the commemorative inscriptions of their enemies, captured and employed their scribes, and stole their libraries to augment their own. The latter practice is particularly interesting for illuminating the mythic theme. Its outstanding practitioner in antiquity was the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal.

During Ashurbanipal's reign in the mid-seventh century BCE, the Assyrian empire was at its height, ruling most of the Near East including Egypt. The Assyrians have a well-deserved reputation for brutality, reinforced by the fact that they decorated their palaces with reliefs depicting their military victories in violent detail. Even a domestic scene of the king reclining at dinner shows the head of an enemy hanging from a nearby tree. But Ashurbanipal also had a literary side. He boasted that he could read and write well (apparently not a wide-spread skill

among royals at the time). He ordered his scribes and his armies to collect texts for him wherever they went. Their number and contents are enumerated in booty lists totaling the yield of personnel and goods from his military campaigns. In his capital at Ninevah, he built libraries in his palace and in the temple of Nabu where texts were catalogued, collated and reproduced (Lieberman 1990, 318). These collections were discovered by archeologists and are the source of many of our best texts from ancient Mesopotamia, including the *Enuma Elish* epic summarized above.

Given these kinds of political and military experiences, the myths about the Tablets of Destiny appear less mystifying. The idea that gods battled for control of powerful texts to establish supremacy simply projects the textual politics of earth onto heaven. It may be that for the very elite scribes/scholars who mastered the Mesopotamian omen series or the Egyptian ritual texts, a text's power lay in it semantic referents. For them the gods' wrote their decrees in nature and written texts only taught scribes what to look for or what to do. But to the less literate and illiterate royal elites as well as commoners, texts were more obviously used by kings and temples to manifest power, wealth, and authority. They were clearly prizes in wars that legitimized the winner's right to rule. The notion that possession of such texts conveyed supremacy would seem obvious enough.

Indeed, it still seems obvious. Libraries and rare books and texts continue to be used as the spoils of war to establish or buttress claims of national identity and international supremacy. For those who study the cultures and religions of the ancient Near East, as I do, the best place to go to see ancient texts and artifacts is not in the Middle East, but in London. The British Museum and the British Library seem to house fully half of all the manuscripts and artifacts that I and others in my field study on a regular basis. They include much of Ashurbanipal's library, which was excavated by British explorers and archeologists in the nineteenth century when the British Empire was at its height. Lawsuits by various countries to reclaim some materials from European and American museums underscore the fact that these objects continue to convey political legitimacy and cultural prestige. Thus texts, art and other cultural artifacts remain prizes of war, just as they were three millennia ago. That is just as true for texts like the Rosetta Stone as for art objects like Nefertiti's Bust. Scholars protest that the needs of researchers, focusing on the semantic dimension of texts, should take priority over politics, represented most forcefully by the iconic dimension. But these texts still function as icons of cultural and political legitimacy whether we like it or not.

The motives behind ancient and modern textual politics are not very different, despite the wide cultural gap between the stated goals of ancient and modern librarians and collectors. A colophon to some of the texts in Asshurbanipal's Nabu temple archive testifies:

I, Assurbanipal, king of the universe, king of Assyria, on whom Nabu and Tashmetu have bestowed vast intelligence, who acquired penetrating acumen for the most recondite details of scholarly erudition, no predecessors of whom among kings having any comprehension of such matters, I wrote down on tablets Nabu's wisdom, the impressing of each and every cuneiform sign, and I checked and collated them. I placed them for the future in the library of the temple of my lord Nabu, the great lord, at Nineveh, for my life and for the well-being of my soul, to avoid disease, and to sustain the foundation of my royal throne. O Nabu, look joyfully and bless my kingship forever! Help me whenever I call upon you! As I traverse your house, keep

constant watch over my footsteps. When this work is deposited in your house and placed in your presence, look upon it and remember me with favor! (tr. Foster 2005, 831)

Here Ashurbanipal boasts of his literacy as a mark of piety to gain personal favor with the gods but also to gain political advantage from his reputation for wisdom and learning. However, the literate king also found it useful to be able to arbitrate the advice of his omen-reading advisers by scanning their texts himself. This is attested by colophons of texts in his palace library that list their purpose "for my review in perusing" and "for my examining" (Lieberman 1990, 318-20, 326-28). His mastery of the semantic dimension of texts gave him advantages over literate subordinates and illiterate rivals. King Ashurbanipal therefore collected and controlled texts (especially the omen series) in order to extend and maintain his power. He had reason to think that controlling the semantic and iconic dimensions of texts in his possession grants power on earth as well as in heaven.

Iconic textuality, however, was also a potent defensive weapon against cultural imperialism. In the face of the onslaught of Hellenistic culture in the last few centuries B.C.E., Egyptian, Babylonian and Jewish temples became bastions of traditional culture and scribal training. Egyptians regarded a temple as the earthly realization of a heavenly book, both in its architectural plan and its inscriptions. The temple's design proclaimed the distinction between inner holiness and outer desecration (Assmann 1997, 179-85). The same can be said of Jerusalem's temple and its purity regulations in the same period. Within temple walls, priests learned to read and write in the native languages, in deliberate resistance to the Hellenizing political and social forces outside (Carr 2005, 177-214). Out of these circumstances developed the practice of ritualizing the iconic, performative and semantic dimensions of the Jewish Torah to produce the first scripture in Western religious traditions (Watts 2011). In the following centuries, Christians consolidated their identity over against the Roman Empire by wielding their Gospel books until Christian emperors transformed Gospels into monuments of the imperium itself, thus producing the second Western scripture (Larson in this volume). Iconic textuality, whether in monumental or manuscript form, represented visually in each of these situations the reconstruction and preservation of a culture and its values that was also furthered by the oral performance and semantic interpretation of texts (on these three dimensions, see Watts 2006).

Iconic Books, Literacy and Expertise

One might expect that the spread of literacy would gradually shift the cultural emphasis from the iconic to the semantic dimensions of texts. As more people learn to read, textual contents would presumably take on greater importance than their visual forms. That is the way the story is usually told of, for example, the development of ancient Judaism. In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E, priests authorized by the iconic ritual texts of the Torah wielded supreme authority in Jerusalem. A thousand years later, however, rabbinic scholars had displaced priests as the religious and, sometimes, secular leaders of the Jews (see e.g. Hengel 1974, 1:78-83; Cohen 1987, 75, 101-102, 160-62; Schaper 2004, 144; Assmann 2006, 122-38). Jack Goody (1986, 4) concluded that, as a result, "alphabetic religions spread literacy and … literacy spread these religions."

This claim reflects a rhetoric of popularized textuality that is a distinctive feature of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in contrast to the religions of the ancient Near East and

Mediterranean. The temples of Babylon, Egypt, and Rome kept their most sacred texts for priests, or even the gods, alone. In contrast to such esoteric religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam published their texts openly. The scriptures themselves require religious leaders to make every effort to publish their contents:

> Every seventh year, … you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns—so that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 31:10-12 NRSV; cf. 6:6-7).

> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, … teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20 NRSV; cf. John 20:31).

> O Messenger! proclaim the (message) which hath been sent to thee from thy Lord. If thou didst not, thou wouldst not have fulfilled and proclaimed His mission (Surah 5:67, Yusufali translation).

Many historians find here a major water-shed in religious and cultural development, what Assmann (2006, 128) calls "the transition from cult religion to book religion." However, such characterizations allow the *ideal* of universal access to scripture and scriptural interpretation espoused by these religions to obscure the social *reality* of how they actually organized their rituals, institutions and surrounding communities. In fact, the increasing ritualization of Torah in all three dimensions (iconic, performative, and semantic) seems to have accompanied the rise to power of the Jewish priests who also monopolized temple rituals (Watts 2011). It played at least a supporting role in giving them unprecedented political as well as religious authority in the mid- and later Second Temple period.

Elsewhere too—and still today—the spread of popular literacy has not displaced learned elites, but rather strengthened and empowered them. Goody (1986, 18) observed that religious institutions have usually dominated scribal and scholarly education in most cultures, despite some prominent exceptions: "the kind of separation between the priest and the teacher, between the religious orders and written accomplishment that occurred in Greece, and to a lesser extent in China, has been a rare feature of literate civilizations." As cultures became more literate, iconic texts continued to play important roles both in religion (e.g. the Torah, Bible, Qur'an) and in politics (e.g. the Twelve Tables, the Magna Carta, the U.S. Constitution). Modern mass literacy turns out to be compatible with both the expertise of scholars and the ritualization of iconic texts.

Why does rising literacy and increasing popular access to texts empower scholarly elites? Because in literate societies, scholarship exemplifies a universal ideal that is nevertheless unattainable except for a small minority. That was certainly true when Deuteronomy first espoused this ideal (Schaper 2004, 109). As literacy spreads, the skills necessary to earn the status of expert scholars ironically increase as well. The multiplication and accumulation of texts creates the need for summaries, commentaries, and synopses, in other words, for the products of rabbinic and scholastic learning that only very few people will ever have the time or resources to master, much less produce (Goody 1983, 162). Thus while literacy spreads and produces more texts, expertise remains concentrated in relatively few people. Literate religious groups often try to expand the circle of textual participation by allocating performance (reading, recitation,

memorization) to a wider, but still privileged circle (Watts 2006; Yoo 2006). But in these groups, the authority of the lector, the cantor and the hafiz usually remains subordinate to that of the scholar.

Why does iconic textuality persist despite increasing literacy and access to texts? Because it provides non-experts control over texts and whatever social and religious power they may possess. Unlike semantic interpretation and public performance for which one should defer to the inner circles of expert scholars and often also to the wider circles of trained readers, physical texts can be owned and manipulated by non-specialists whether literate or not (see Yoo in this volume). Venerating a material text lies entirely within the control of the individual worshiper. In antiquity and still today, textual amulets are common and widespread (Malley 2006). Already by the last two centuries B.C.E., Jews were placing phylacteries (*tifillin*) containing excerpts from the Torah on their foreheads and forearms during prayers and affixing similar containers (*mezuzot*) on their doorposts. Many ancient Christians carried scrolls that mixed scriptural texts, especially the words of Jesus, with magical formulas. In a seventh-century battle at Siffin between Muslim armies, one side displayed Quranic verses on spears to pressure the other side to agree to arbitration on the basis of the scriptures. Still today, people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds revere Arabic Qur'anic texts as powerful amulets.

Many scholars view such practices as a stage on an evolutionary spectrum between illiteracy and full literacy: Schaper (2004, 112), for example, comments that in ancient Judah, "writing is still a numinous act." But for very many people alive today, including cultural elites who take oaths on scriptures and stockpile books in expensive libraries, "writing is still a numinous act." Every one of the forms of iconic textuality in the ancient Near East continues to be reproduced in modernity, though in different proportions. If monumental inscriptions do not cover every inch of our public buildings, they still appear especially on government buildings and libraries to point to the huge collections of books and other documents inside. Books remain a prominent feature of portraiture, especially of civic, academic and religious portraiture, though they also show up frequently in other kinds of art and illustration. Processions with books held high continue to be a standard feature of many Jewish, Christian, Sikh, and Buddhist rituals, while protestors waving scriptures have been prominent in recent political news from America, the Middle East and Asia. And while myths of supernatural books appear commonly only in fantasy novels, art and movies, the divine nature of scriptures remains a potent point of theological contention between sects and denominations (Parmenter 2009b). Differences in emphasis and practice do not reflect different levels of cultural development, but rather the ideological stakes that different social groups have in books and other written texts.

Nineteenth and twentieth-century scholarship belittled such iconic book practices as folkloric or superstitious (on scholarship on Buddhism and Islam, see Kinnard and Suit in this volume), but that attitude was not new. In the fourth century, the ascetic Bible translator, Jerome (*Ep*. 22.32), was already criticizing Christians who valued Gospel books for their pretty appearance rather than reading them, and that critique has been maintained by preachers and professors ever since. Public manipulation of iconic books in political and judicial oath ceremonies and public monuments receives less criticism, since in these cases those manipulating the socially sanctioned textual icon tend to be powerful or rich. Even here, scholars treat the iconic dimension as second- or third-best, something that must be accommodated because of cultural traditions but should not be privileged (Watts 2009). Scholars' socially

mandated focus is on the more prestigious semantic dimension. More than anyone else, it is scholars who look down on iconic manipulation of texts as folk custom or superstition.

As William Graham (1987, 164) has argued, historians have "seriously short-changed both ourselves and our field of study by ignoring or minimizing the 'sensual' aspects of religious life." Though much has changed on that score in the study of religion since he wrote those words, the study of scriptures has not. This near-universal dismissal of iconic textuality is unexamined at best and prejudicial at worst.

Two recent political manipulations of iconic texts in American culture show that this blindness to the iconic function of texts is restricted to academic scholars. Politicians have frequently proven adept at manipulating the iconic dimensions of books and texts for political purposes. Their practices range from the conventional manipulation of sacred books while taking an oath of office to extraordinary staging, as these examples show.

On January 3rd, 2007, Keith Ellison took the oath of office on a Qur'an once owned by Thomas Jefferson. Ellison was the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress. His intention to take the oath on a Qur'an aroused a storm of controversy in a country accustomed to seeing only Bibles in this role. Ellison responded by using Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an for this purpose. This textual relic is valued for its association with an American founding father and so places a nationalistic stamp on these particular volumes of Muslim scripture.

On May 21st, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama went to the Rotunda of the National Archives to give a speech about his plans to close the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The setting allowed him to use the relic manuscript of the U.S. Constitution as a backdrop while he addressed a television audience on the topic of constitutional law and terrorism. His picture standing in front of the Constitution conveyed visually his claim of defending the rights guaranteed by that document.

In both of these instances, politicians and their advisers manipulated national and religious texts intelligently and expertly to persuade their audience in their favor. They received, however, no help from academic theories of iconic texts, which are rare and not widely known. These political examples show, however, that only scholars suffer from this blind spot about iconic books and texts. It is not produced by levels of literacy, social development, or intelligence.

Why has this lacuna in scholarship persisted for so long? As scholars of humanistic texts, we do not like to admit our own dependence on political and economic forces and their influence on our scholarship, even though nations try to leverage their investment in universities into greater economic productivity and competitive advantages in the so-called "information economy." We especially do not like to admit that the status and appeal of our favorite texts may depend as much or even more on such factors than on their semantic meaning (see further Carr 2005, 294-97, and Solibakke in this volume). Hence scholarly ignorance about iconic texts: it allows us to be in denial of the social conditions of our own livelihood. We insist that a text's real meaning lies in its semantic interpretation alone, that we are the experts at elucidating. But many of our texts mediate power and legitimacy in ways that semantic and even performative interpretation cannot understand or control.

The study of iconic books and texts will not change the power relationships mediated by texts. However, comparative and historical study of the functions of books and texts in the iconic dimension, as well as in the dimensions of semantic interpretation and performance, will enable us to describe those forces more clearly and understand better our own role as scholars in ritualizing books and texts. They will hopefully provide analytical tools that will help us employ all three textual dimensions more wisely and constructively in the future.

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