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Scriptures' Indexical Touch

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Abstract: Touching and holding books does not usually evoke the language of sensation. Touching a book indexes the reader in relationship to the book. Holding a book of scripture indexes a person as faithful to the beliefs and practices that are commonly associated with that scripture. In portraiture, the direction of a book's indexical function is usually clear. Scribes, professors, lawyers and politicians pose in their libraries, often with book in hand, to depict themselves as scholars. The fact that scriptures are books makes a vocabulary of textual agency available for describing their symbolic function. The indexical link between book and person gains force from the fact that books and people share the quality of interiority. We think of both books and people as material containers of immaterial ideas. Therefore, images of people with books invite viewers to consider the relationship between their invisible ideas. However, art that portrays a god or goddess holding a scripture conveys a tighter indexical relationship, often to the point of collapsing any distinction between them.

Books must be manipulated in order to be used *as books*. Whether in the form of scrolls or codices, books must be picked up and unrolled or opened. They must be held in one's hands or set on a desk, where they often have to be held open. Books are designed to be touched.

Touching books, unlike touching most other objects, does not indicate the reader's control of the book. Instead, it usually represents the book's control of the reader. Touching books *reverses* the usual implications of holding and manipulating an object: it is not so much that you touch the book as that it touches you. The significance of touching a book is really about indexing the person who reads or holds or, at least, touches the book. Touching a book indexes the reader in relationship to the book.

Indexing readers by ritualizing scriptures

By "indexing," I am using language developed by C. S. Pierce (1867) to categorize signs.¹ An index is connected to its referent by some factual or causal relationship between them. For modern books, the most obvious indexical relationship lies between the book and its author: the existence of a book turns its writer into its author. Books, however, also index their readers as people who know what is in this book, who value this book, and, perhaps, as people who have been affected by this book in one way or another.

Books of scripture index their readers and handlers in especially potent ways. Touching scriptures serves to establish and maintain a person's religious identity. It marks them by their relationship to the book and their relationship through the book to the religion and to its customary beliefs and practices.

The indexical use of scriptures is one example of the broader indexical function of rituals. Roy Rappaport (1999) maintained that rituals customarily serve to index their participants' relationship to the ritual's purpose and to each other. Thus a wedding obviously indexes the couple's new status as married, not only to themselves but also to everyone who witnesses or hears about the wedding. Rappaport observed that the indexical function of rituals does not depend on people's mental agreement with the tradition: you do not have to believe in all the doctrines of the religious tradition or even agree that this couple should get married in order to attend a wedding. Willing participation in the wedding ceremony does, however, index your acceptance of the "canonical order" represented by the ritual. You cannot deny that the couple is married without lying. The ritual indexes its participants' place in the social relationships that it expresses.

¹ My use of the term "icon" to describe iconic books, however, goes beyond Pierce's definition of an icon as resembling its referent. The terminology of "iconic books" depends instead on Byzantine icon theory and later elaborations of it (Parmenter 2006), in which icons have indexical and symbolic as well as iconic functions in Pierce's terminology. He allowed that signs can function as symbols, icons and indices simultaneously. An iconic book, then, does represent things it resembles, such as other books or books in general. But symbolic uses of books make the book stand for something else, such as knowledge, learning, wisdom, or religion. Indexical use of books points out their factual or causal relationships to people or other things. The Iconic Books Project defines an iconic book as a visible and material object that, like an Orthodox Christian icon and many other kinds of religious art, is believed to put viewers and readers in touch with an immaterial, transcendent reality. In the case of books, that immaterial reality is, in the first place, the conceptual contents of the book's text. In the case of scriptures, that immaterial reality is believed to be spiritual, transcendent, and divine. Such iconic books function as icons, symbols, and indices according to Pierce's description of signs.

According to Rappaport, some ritual objects index the performer and others represent the canon. A few items, such as the crowns of kings, “seem to be intermediate.... Such objects are themselves parts of the canonical order, but their manipulation is in part self-referential” (Rappaport 1999, 145). Books of scriptures are intermediate like crowns. The iconic ritualization of scriptures references the “canonical order” of orthodox beliefs as well as indexing those who hold, touch, and read them in a self-referential manner.

Holding a book of scripture thus indexes a person as faithful to the beliefs and practices that are commonly associated with that scripture. By holding or touching the scripture, a person presents themselves as pious and orthodox by the standards of that scripture's religious tradition. Showing oneself holding the scripture is therefore an important form of self-presentation in many religious traditions.² The act of touching or holding the scripture also claims for that person the benefits promised by the scripture's tradition. Many people believe these benefits to be quite real, though they may not define them more specifically than by saying that “it is a blessing” to hold or touch the scripture.

Of course, other religious symbols serve the same purpose. Religious devotion frequently ascribes agency to symbols, images, and amulets. Because we do not normally grant agency to such objects, stories about icons and relics, for example, get classified as miraculous. However, the fact that scriptures are books makes a vocabulary of textual agency available for describing their symbolic function. Conventional discourse readily accepts the agency of books, so their religious effects can be described as due to having extraordinarily effective texts rather than or in addition to miraculous intervention. Investing textual media with religious symbolism changes the discourse of agency around those symbols. To modern rationalists, it makes the power of books appear more “natural” and rational than the power of other religious symbols and objects.

Textual effects depend, of course, on people actually reading the books. Intellectuals in all scriptural religions frequently complain about the low level of scriptural knowledge among their fellow believers. A book of scripture, however, serves simultaneously as a text to be interpreted, a script to be performed orally, and an icon to be venerated (Watts 2006). Most people do not distinguish these different dimensions of scriptural agency, so the conventional semantic agency of books supports claims to the divinely-enhanced agency of scriptures in the performative and iconic dimensions as well.

Taking oaths and vows frequently involves manipulating a book of scripture. Here touch or proximity indexes people in especially obvious ways: touching the book visually proclaims their new office or obligations at the same time that speaking the oath does in the hearing of others. The ritual indexes their new status through the sight of touching the book and the sound of the oath.

Touch conveys greater intimacy than hearing. In human cultures, touching skin to skin conveys both vulnerability and intimacy. When books were written on parchment, that is, on processed animal hides, touching them involved touching skin to skin. The analogy between intimate reading and human intimacy was naturalized by the touch of parchment. Perhaps that is

² Just as in secular culture: portraits of scholars and lawyers in their libraries are clichés of ancient, medieval and modern visual culture.

why leather remains a popular binding material for Bibles. The sensation of leather in one's hands promotes a feeling of intimacy with the scripture.

The kiss is a more intimate form of touch. The use of lips brings the devotee one step closer to the vulnerability of eating and drinking that exposes the person and book to each other's effects. The kiss is the most intimate public expression, so it is not surprising that people often exhibit their devotion to a book of scripture by kissing it (except in cultures that regard spit as polluting, which therefore frown on kissing scriptures). In liturgical churches, the reader kisses the Gospel before and after reading it aloud. In synagogues, people often kiss prayer books and shawls after using them to touch the Torah scroll. Kissing the wrong scripture can elicit outrage because kissing indexes the person in relationship to the book even more powerfully than touch does. For example, when Pope John Paul II was presented a Qur'an in 1999 and kissed it as if it were a Gospel book (Fides 1999), he outraged many conservative Catholics.

Touching books

Touch and handling are therefore essential to the book's function, essential to reading it. That is not true of all texts: reading billboards or blackboards or Powerpoint presentations requires only looking. Nor do all uses of books require touching: books can be used as icons simply by displaying them. But when a book is displayed in this way, little or any of it can be read. Reading books requires manipulation. So do letters and e-readers. Reading most texts involves the hands as much as the eyes.

However, to speak of "manipulating books" makes people feel uncomfortable. It is an accurate description of how books are used. But while manipulating hammers and forks sounds routine, to speak of manipulating books sounds like doing something wrong. The language of manipulation indicates the reader's control over the book. And while readers do control physical books just as much as carpenters control their hammers, it feels transgressive to admit it.

The problem is that the phrase "manipulating books" suggests that readers control the contents of books. That is not the way that reading is supposed to work. By "supposed to," I am referring to the ways our languages direct how we think about and speak about books. It sounds jarring to assert that readers determine the meaning of the books they read, even though that is self-evidently the case: readers decide that the object they hold is a book, they decide that its markings are letters, they decide which language the letters encode, and they translate the visual signs into mental or spoken language. At every stage, readers can decide differently and sometimes do.

Nevertheless, that description of the reading process does not accord with the cultural presentation of how books work. We think of reading as a process in which the book is active and the reader passive. We think of books as having their own agency. Books "speak" to us. We frequently comment on how a particular book has "changed" our minds or "moved" us. Its stories "touch" us. The book acts upon the reader, often changing the reader's mind or beliefs or commitments.

Many stories of reading sacred texts end in religious conversions. A famous example is that of Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*. It is instructive that the child's chant that inspired him

to open randomly and read a verse from Paul's letter to the Romans commanded him first to hold the book: *tolle, lege* "take, read."³ Though these active imperatives emphasize Augustine's actions, he describes an experience of being acted upon: "a light of serenity infused my heart." Reading is experienced as a passive activity.

When we shift our focus to the reader's activity in reading, we do not usually use the language of touch and manipulation, but rather of eating. We eagerly "consume" or "devour" a good book. Eating is, of course, the most intimate of physical relationships. We do not simply manipulate food: we internalize it and it nourishes us, in fact, becomes part of us. So when I "consume" a book, I am nourished, preserved, or changed. The implication of the metaphor is that I am affected by the book (see the essay by Yohan Yoo in this volume). Unlike food, however, the book remains unchanged. By thinking of reading as eating, we again affirm the book's agency.

So, in contrast to hammers, to speak of touching books does not usually describe the reader's control of the book. Instead, it indicates the book's control of the reader. Many people believe that contact with scriptures or portions of their text can be effective in transforming their bodies and circumstances (see the essays in this volume by Katharina Wilkens, David Ganz and Dorina Parmenter). Touch also establishes an indexical relationship between book and human, in which the book legitimizes a person's identity (see Christian Frevel in this volume). Depending on the book, that identity may be as reader, author, or scholar. Books of scripture index people's religious identities.

Avoiding scripture's touch

Scripture veneration, however, frequently manifests itself in a refusal to touch scripture or in restrictions on how it may be touched. My research on the Torah in antiquity and in traditional Jewish ritual practices provides some interesting examples of scripture's indexical touch and its restrictions. (See also Marianne Schleicher's essay in this volume.)

Jewish scribes who copy Torah scrolls must purify themselves first, according to the Talmudic rules. Many other Jews try to avoid touching the scrolls directly. In the course of a synagogue service, cloth covers and pointers mediate between human bodies and scrolls so that the Torah need never be subjected to unmediated touch. The effort to avoid touching Torah scrolls directly while ritualizing various forms of mediated touch suggests that the divine text is powerful enough to affect people through other media, but human touch is not. Touch mediated

³ "So was I speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo! I heard from a neighbouring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating. 'Take up and read; Take up and read.' ['Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege!'] Instantly, my countenance altered, I began to think most intently whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words: nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find... Eagerly then I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I laid the volume of the Apostle when I arose thence. I seized, opened, and in silence read that section on which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence.' [Romans 13:14-15] No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away." Augustine (2001, Book Eight, Chapter 12, Paragraphs 27-28).

by covers, prayer book or shawl is believed to convey a blessing, and the manipulation of *mezuzahs* and *tefillin*, boxes that contain hand-written portions of the Torah, is characteristic of Jewish devotion. *Mezuzahs* serve as very public marker of Jewish identity and *tefillin* index Orthodox practice (see Frevel's essay in this volume). Thus various forms of mediated touch index and differentiate Jewish identity through ritual manipulation of the Torah.

Concerns about polluting touch took a paradoxical form in ancient rabbinic literature. The Mishnah defines scriptures as books "that defile the hands" (*m. Yad. 3:5*). This strange way of categorizing the most holy objects in Judaism has stimulated a great deal of debate from rabbinic to modern times. It is clear that the power to defile the hands sets scriptures apart from other books, and so performs a typical function of pollution language in separating holy objects from common ones. John Barton (1997, 107-121) suggested that the rabbis' concern focused specifically on texts that contain the name of God, YHWH, written in Hebrew letters. The custom of never pronouncing the name of God became widespread in ancient Judaism because of awe and fear of its power. So Barton argued that the rabbis also feared touching a text containing the divine name. Defining scriptures as "defiling the hands" establishes a prohibition for the sense of touch to parallel the prohibition on hearing the sound of the divine name. Seeing the divine name in writing was not prohibited: it appears on almost every page of Jewish scriptures, the Tanak. The rules against unmediated touch of the scripture scroll, like the rule against speaking the name, drew attention to the sanctity and power of the name especially at the moment when one sees it written on the page. Thus in rabbinic ritual rules, perception of divinity by the sight of the divine name was controlled by prohibiting its perception by the sense of hearing and by unmediated touch of the sacred scrolls in which it is written.

Fear of damaging or defiling scriptures by touch is not limited to Jewish practices. Many Muslims avoid touching Qur'ans until they can assure themselves of being clean (Suit 2010). Many Sikhs do not own a complete copy of their scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, because of the many requirements for its proper maintenance (Myrvold 2010b). Nor are such fears peculiar to religious communities. Libraries limit access to their rare books. When they grant access, they often require only mediated touch (gloves) under the supervision of library personnel. Public display of rare books is usually accompanied by the injunction, "Do not touch!" Here fear of manipulation is fear of destruction, and leads to preventing touch entirely. As a result, ancient and rare books in modern libraries and museums can become only aesthetic objects, available only to sight, the most remote and least intimate of the human senses. Viewing such books does not index the viewer, though displaying them does index their owner's wealth and prestige as well as enhance the status of books themselves. (For an aesthetic evaluation of all aspects of iconic books, see Brent Plate's essay in this volume.)

Fear of harm and destruction is, of course, warranted both for rare books and for scriptures. Devoted touches and kisses often wear away the texts and pages of books (see Ganz's essay in this volume). More worrisome to devotees is the possibility of scriptures becoming subject to hostile touch in the form of deliberate desecration and destruction. An act of desecration refuses a scripture's indexical touch and instead violently exerts manipulative control over the book. Desecrators destroy the book to manipulate the scripture's indexical relationship to the community that venerates it. The responses of outrage from the scripture's devotees testify to the power of that indexical relationship (Watts 2009).

It would be natural to regard the indexical function of books, and of scriptures in particular, as a secondary consequence of a book's social and religious prestige. That would be a mistake, for two reasons. First, books in general index those who read and handle them as literate and so, in many cultures, as educated and intellectual. The appearance of a book performs this function even when the contents of the book are not identified. Second, many books and other texts are created for indexical uses. Some books have been written, copied, published, and sold to be touched as much as to be read. I will describe just one famous example from my research on biblical texts to illustrate this point.

Touching written texts in the Torah

The Bible describes the tablets of the Ten Commandments as written primarily for indexical use. Exodus tells the story, and Deuteronomy repeats it. Moses climbs Mount Sinai to hear God's revelation of the law. At the end of forty days, he is given tablets "written by the finger of God" (Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). He descends the mountain with the tablets in his hand to the Israelite camp, where he finds the people worshipping the golden calf. Moses breaks the tablets, which expresses Moses' anger and also illustrates the fact that the Israelites have broken the covenant with God inscribed on the tablets. After setting things straight, Moses returns to the mountain and receives a second set of tablets (Exod. 34) which he deposits in the Ark of the Covenant, a box built especially to hold the tablets (Exod. 25:10-16; Deut 10:1-5).

Nobody in this story or anywhere else in the Bible actually reads the tablets of the commandments. There is no need to, because Moses already wrote down the law on a scroll which he read aloud to the people (Exod. 24:3-4, 7). Before he dies, he writes it down again and gives the scroll to the Levitical priests with instructions to read it aloud every seven years to all the Israelites (Deut. 31:9-13). This Torah scroll is supposed to be kept next to the ark that contains the tablets of the covenant (Deut. 31:24-26).

The Torah thus describes itself as taking two different textual forms, one public and the other hidden. Contrary to what one might expect, the esoteric and exoteric texts do not differ in contents: we are assured that the scroll that is read aloud in its entirety contains all the laws given by God at Sinai (Exod. 24:4; Deut. 31:24), which must include whatever was written on the tablets.

The tablets and scroll differ instead in their purpose and use. While the scroll is meant for publication, the tablets are a deposit text. It is their existence in Israel's possession that guarantees Israel's covenant with God. The tablets of the commandments are not public monuments in the Bible, despite how they are usually portrayed in Jewish and Christian art and sculpture (though the Torah must also be inscribed monumentally: Deut 6:9; 27:4; see Frevel in this volume). The tablets are created to serve as relic texts (Watts 2006, 155-56). They are hidden away in their ark reliquary where they cannot be seen or touched. As relics, what is most important is that Israel possesses them.

As is typically the case with reliquaries, possessing and touching the ark carries the same indexical power as the tablets of the commandments. Only the priests are allowed to approach the ark (Lev. 16:2, 12-14) and special precautions must be taken when carrying it (Num. 4:5-20). Having the ark reliquary in one's possession has the power to bless (2 Sam. 6:11) or to curse (1

Sam. 5-6), depending on one's intentions. Accidentally touching it has the power to kill (2 Sam. 6:6-7). The ark containing the tablets thus indexes Israel as the people of God's covenant.

The books of Exodus and Deuteronomy equate the contents of the tablets and the scroll to prepare the way for the Torah scroll to assume the tablets' indexical function, as it did in later Judaism (Watts 2015, 2016; for other Pentateuchal texts that emphasize material uses of texts, see the essay by Frevel in this volume). This was already the case in the early Second Temple period when the priest and scribe, Ezra, is described as returning from Babylon with the Torah "in his hand" (Ezra 7:14). Biblical literature thus establishes the ritual pattern in which the powerful form of scripture is the hand-held form, which mythically is the tablets hidden in the ark but in ritual experience is the Torah scroll.

The puzzle of indexical circles between book and deity

The indexical function of scriptures gains strength from the nature of written texts as visual and material representations of their contents. This power is illustrated by visual art depicting books. In portraiture, the direction of a book's indexical function is usually clear. Scribes, professors, lawyers and politicians pose in their libraries, often with book in hand, to depict themselves as scholars. The implication is that they know what is written in the books around them. Rabbis, ministers and saints pose with a book of scripture or commentary to show their piety and orthodoxy. The implication is that they conform to the ideals advocated by their scripture. In the case of author's portraits, books and humans index each other: the human as author and the books as being that author's work. The implication is that all the books' contents are the author's ideas.

The indexical link between book and person gains force from the fact that books and people share the quality of interiority. Books have contents and people have thoughts. We think of both books and people as material containers of immaterial ideas. This belief generates a tendency in many cultures to treat material books like you treat human bodies (see the essays in Myrvold 2010a). Therefore, images of people with books invite viewers to consider the relationship between their invisible ideas.

Art that portrays a god or goddess holding a scripture conveys a tighter indexical relationship. The images adopt the conventional pose of human portraiture. But in the case of a deity holding a book, it is difficult to decide which indexes the other. Such images presuppose that the human form of the deity is a visual analogy for a transcendent reality. The book may or may not have a material existence, but its representation in this context overwhelms its physical form with its transcendent contents. Thus images of Jesus holding the Gospels or Brahma holding the Vedas do not just index the deity by the book or vice-versa. They identify them. Here the indexical circle tightens to the point of collapsing any distinction between them.

Some religious traditions and mystical groups within traditions are more likely to accept the equation of deity and book than others. The New Testament's description of Christ as the "Word of God" (John 1:1) inaugurated a tendency in ritual and art to identify him with the written Gospels. Dorina Parmenter (2006, 170) has pointed out that one ancient Christian text, the Gospel of Truth from Nag Hammadi, describes Christ's death as the crucifixion of a book.

Michelle Brown (2010, 59) found a medieval sculpture of the Virgin Mary holding a codex in the usual place occupied by the Christ child.

Other religious traditions go further. Jewish mysticism in the Zohar speculate about the metaphysical relationship between God and Torah (Wolfson 2004). South Asian traditions have been very open to the metaphysical identity of book and deity. The Buddhist texts called Prajnaparamita appear in medieval art in the form of a goddess by that name (Kinnard 2002). Some Hindus have recently begun depicting the Bhagavad Gita as the goddess Maata Geeta (Joanne Waghorne, personal communication).

The appearance of books in divine images draws our attention to the fact that the contents of books seem to transcend their material manifestation. Books' contents survive the material destruction of books because they appear in multiple copies. By copying, the contents of books can be preserved over much longer periods of time than can a scroll or codex. This characteristic of texts has led to the common observation that writing provides people the only demonstrable form of life after death. Because ideas live on in books, books materialize transcendence. Touching and holding books allows people to come into contact with immaterial values. By touching and holding scriptures, they feel like they can touch divinity.

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