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Introduction

Materiality, Liminality, and the Digital Turn: The Sacred Texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Material Perspective

> [Writing] is a maiden with a pen, a harlot in print.
> – *Filippo de Strata*

The above quotation comes from a fifteenth century Benedictine monk who was not particularly happy with the rise of print culture – a sentiment I suspect he shared with many contemporaries.[1] Technological developments have a long history of disrupting society and culture, and changes to how texts have been produced and transmitted through the centuries have been a large part of such developments. Indeed, from scroll to codex, from manuscript to moveable print, and from book culture to digital contexts, these changes have been monumental in shaping how people communicate.

It is not surprising that sacred texts have been at the heart of many such developments; and yet, the relationship between sacred texts and the material forms in which they are embodied is a complicated one in many traditions. The traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam often describe their respective sacred texts as timeless – indeed, divine – messages. An implication of this "timelessness" is that within these traditions, focus has been placed primarily on the *content* of these texts, while issues of *materiality* have often been taken for granted. From this perspective, scrolls, books, and digital devices are simply receptacles in which the text is housed. However, such thinking masks the fact that these texts are *always embodied* in particular material forms, which emerge in specific times and places, and such embodiment necessarily has implications for the use and reception of these texts.

It is often during times of change that the materiality of objects becomes apparent, and we are living through such a moment.[2] Using the digital turn as a starting point, this volume explores how the materiality of artefacts shapes our knowledge concerning the development and transmission of the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as the way in which people engage with,

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1 Quoted in Keith Houston, *The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016), 128–29.

2 See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

use, and perform these texts – that is, how materiality informs our understanding of the interplay of form and function, of production and use. What might it mean to reclaim materiality as a key element of our study of religious traditions and their scriptures? What might materiality and physicality tell us about the use and function of these texts? What is the relationship between material forms of sacred texts and their use, whether for scholars, religious authorities, or lay people? And what can we learn about how and why sacred texts transition between different media forms, including the digital turn which we ourselves are witnessing? Drawing on developments that have taken root in the broader "material turn" – including material philology, book history, and research on the iconic and performative dimensions of sacred texts – this volume explores how issues of materiality factor into the production, use, and interpretation of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[3] In doing so, these essays seek to resituate materiality, along with transitions between media forms, as significant for the academic study of sacred texts within and between these religious traditions.

1 Key Themes in the Volume

Four key areas are highlighted in this volume. First, the essays give sustained attention to the diverse ways in which materiality has impacted the production and use of sacred texts in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam down through the centuries. From antiquity, those studying the Tanakh, the Bible, and the Qur'ān have focused their attention almost exclusively on proper understanding and interpretation of these collections. This is understandable; after all, it is the *content* of these writings that has most interested readers down through the centuries. As noted above, this has resulted in widespread understanding within these traditions of an abstract, disembodied message, with little thought given to the materiality of such texts. Perhaps unwittingly, these same presumptions have carried over into the academic study of these textual traditions, where the semantic dimension – the content and its interpretation – has received the vast majority of scholarly attention.

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3 On the material turn in the study of religion, see S. Brent Plate (ed.), *Key Terms in Material Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); David Morgan (ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of* Belief (Oxford: Routledge, 2010). Examples of research exploring the materiality of sacred texts in particular can be found in Liv Ingeborg Lied and Hugo Lundhaug (eds.), *Snapshots of Evolving Traditions: Jewish and Christian Manuscript Culture, Textual Fluidity, and New Philology*, TUGAL 175 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017); and James W. Watts, *Iconic Books and Texts* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2015).

A result of this focus on text and meaning is that there has been relatively little attention given to issues of materiality in the academic study of sacred texts. It is only in recent years that the embodied nature of texts – including scriptures, across traditions – has begun to be taken seriously as an object of critical study. What do issues of materiality tell us about sacred texts and their use? How do elements such as paper and ink, formatting and spacing, or paratexts and reading aids inform our understanding of the transmission and use of such texts? This volume contributes to the burgeoning conversation that places issues of materiality at the forefront of our research into the production and use of sacred texts (see in particular the essays from Krauß and Schücking-Jungblut; Batovici; Hilali; Outhwaite; Poleg; and Dillon).

Second, this volume focuses not only on issues of materiality, but also explores changes and transitions between material forms, including the liminal spaces that emerge from such developments. This, too, is an area that has received limited attention in scholarship, particularly among those scholars who work closely with the texts themselves. Developments in the sociology of translation over the past several decades have made it clear that such transitions are never simply about a change from one format to another. Rather, changes and transitions often carry social and cultural elements that are important parts of such changes.[4] While such media transitions have been formative in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, beyond the rise of the printing press, little critical attention has been given to analysing such matters. From the scroll to the codex, from manuscript to print culture, from book culture to digital texts: these transitions have shaped in significant ways the religious traditions in question, and the essays in this volume explore a number of such developments (see the contributions from Outhwaite; Poleg; del Barco; Allen; Fedeli; Suit; and Anderson).

Third, this project brings issues of materiality and the digital turn into conversation with one another. Scholars of sacred texts have in recent years begun to shift their attention to issues of materiality, with significant results.[5] Further, there is a growing (if disparate) body of literature on sacred texts and digital culture.[6] Nevertheless, there has been little research done to date – theoretical or otherwise – that attempts to bring these issues together, reflecting on digital texts

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4 See, e.g., Bruno Latour, "On Technical Mediation," *Common Knowledge* 3/2 (1994): 29–64; Jonathan Westin, "Loss of Culture: New Media Forms and the Translation from Analogue to Digital Books," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 19/2 (2012): 129–40.

5 A fine example is David Stern, *The Jewish Bible: A Material History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

6 Jeffrey S. Siker, *Liquid Scripture: The Bible in a Digital World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

as new instantiations of materiality in which sacred texts are encountered.[7] What issues are raised when we begin to think about digital texts as new forms of materiality? What is lost or gained in such usage? There is much ground still to be ploughed in this area of enquiry, and a number of essays in the present volume do important work on this very subject (see essays from Allen; Fedeli; Mann; Suit; Anderson).

Finally, by exploring the texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in light of materiality, this volume aims to contribute in a unique manner to the ongoing discussion of these traditions and the interrelationships between them. Much work has been done in recent decades on points of convergence and divergence within and among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[8] Indeed, this has included important research on the textual traditions of these religions.[9] However, a lacuna in this developing area of study is how the *materiality* of the texts which are sacred to these traditions might inform our understanding of the interrelationship of the traditions – whether formal or informal, intentional or accidental. Again, essays in this collection make important contributions in this regard, suggesting that the traditions in question react, borrow, respond, or indirectly engage with one another around matters of materiality (Outhwaite; Dillon; Allen; Anderson).

2 Structure and Content of the Volume

This volume offers a concise entry point to the theme of sacred texts and materiality, and it does so with a broad chronological scope – moving from ancient and medieval contexts to concerns of the contemporary, digital world. Two sections serve to structure the volume: the first section – Sacred Texts and Material Contexts – explores issues such as the relationship of materiality and form, transitions between material forms, paratextual elements, and transmission and use of sacred texts. The second section – Sacred Texts and the Digital Turn – then analyses various aspects related to sacred texts and the contemporary world, including scholarship and the digital humanities, textual authority in the digital age, and socio-cultural elements in the transition from analogue to digital forms.

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7 See, recently, Claire Clivaz's work, which touches on these issues: *Ecritures digitales. Digital writing, Digital Scriptures*, DBS 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

8 Along with volumes in the JCIT series (de Gruyter), see, e.g., Moshe Blidstein, Adam J. Silverstein, and Guy G. Stroumsa, *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

9 F.E. Peters, *The Voice, the Word, the Books: The Sacred Scripture of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Together these essays explore significant questions related to the materiality of sacred texts in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, while also highlighting transitions between various media cultures.

Part One (Sacred Texts and Material Contexts) focuses on questions of materiality, particularly in manuscript and print culture. This section begins with three essays that explore some of the earliest forms of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures.

The first contribution is an essay from Anna Krauß and Friederike Schücking-Jungblut exploring the layout of poetic units in the Dead Sea Psalms scrolls ("Stichographic Layout in the Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls: Observations on its Development and its Potential"). Exploring some of the most ancient extant material forms of the Jewish Scriptures, Krauß and Schücking-Jungblut demonstrate how the development of the stichographic layout in certain Psalms – the arrangement of poetical units in stylized lines – can help us better understand how these texts were used and understood in ancient Judaism. As they note,

> material aspects as well as the structure and layout of the writing, helps us to understand the role of text-bearing artefacts as agents in a textual community. In the transition from an oral to a textual culture, texts are reliant on their material embodiment to be preserved. The modes in which a text is recited influences its layout on written artefacts and reciprocally the layout of a written text predetermines its reading, reciting, and interpretation (31–32).

In the second chapter, Dan Batovici explores the complex question of whether or not, and in what way, paratexts functioned as "Reading Aids in Early Christian Papyri". In particular, Batovici complicates the idea that such paratextual features – including *paragraphi*, vacant end lines, *ekthesis*, *diairesis*, breathings and accents, titles and subtitles, enlarged first letter of verse or chapter, spaces, and acute-like text division marker or miscellaneous strokes – can be used to identify a text meant for public or private use. In doing so, Batovici highlights the broader implications of such analysis: "not only do we lack the means of establishing whether a papyrus was meant for public or private reading in the absence of clear testimonies in this sense (e.g. an explicit colophon), but when we draw too clear-cut a distinction between public and private papyri, we run the risk of oversimplifying the reading culture of early and late-antique Christianity" (47–48).

The third chapter turns our attention to Islam, as Asma Hilali explores material aspects of early Islamic fragments and manuscripts ("Writing the Qur'ān Between the Lines: Marginal and Interlinear Notes in Selected Qur'ān Fragments from the Museum of Islamic Art, Qatar"). Annotations within early Qur'ānic manuscripts are rare and unsystematic, as is evidenced by examples of emendations written between the lines as well as in the margins. Such examples, however, are enlightening, in that they point to the transmission of the textual tradition, and

may even give us a glimpse of "the first steps towards the scholastic transmission tradition which would later emerge" in Islam (59–60).

The next several chapters in this section begin to explore transitions between material forms, and the material implications of such developments. Ben Outhwaite offers an important exploration of "The Sefer Torah and Jewish Orthodoxy in the Islamic Middle Ages". Drawing on evidence from the Cairo Genizah and other sources, Outhwaite examines the diverse factors that led to the codex being adopted within Judaism. Key issues include the changing conditions of the Jewish community under Islamic rule, and the need for different Jewish groups – Rabbanite and Qaraite, Palestinian and Babylonian – to clearly differentiate themselves from one another.

Javier del Barco's essay continues the discussion regarding the shift from scroll to codex in Judaism ("From Scroll to Codex: Dynamics of Text-Layout Transformations in the Hebrew Bible"). Here del Barco focuses on the implications for the text-layout of the Hebrew Bible in this transition. He examines regulations used for copying Torah scrolls, and how these same guidelines were used (even if irregularly) in the new format of the biblical codex. These textual dynamics, del Barco suggests, have much to tell us about the functional dimensions of these formats, as well as the relationship between scroll and codex after the emergence of the latter.

Eyal Poleg's contribution offers another perspective on text-layout, focusing in particular on the layout of the Psalms in late medieval and early modern Bibles ("Memory, Performance, and Change: The Psalms' Layout in Late Medieval and Early Modern Bibles"). From late medieval pandects to early modern mass-printed books, Poleg demonstrates that new, innovative layouts and revisions were often introduced, only to be rolled back in subsequent editions in favour of traditional divisions, translations, and liturgical elements related to the Psalms. He notes that such "transformations reveal the power of performance and mnemonics" (147), as both clergy and laity encountered and recounted the psalms primarily in liturgical contexts. "Performance remained key to the way the Psalms were presented and recalled" (148).

The final chapter in this section brings us forward to the contemporary period, and hints at a number of issues to be addressed in Part Two of the volume. Nevertheless, Amanda Dillon's essay demonstrates that the materiality of print culture continues to be a powerful force in the contemporary use of sacred texts, and that there is significant continuity between past and present in how users and readers engage with these texts ("Be Your Own Scribe: Bible Journalling and the New Illuminators of the Densely-Printed Page"). Dillon explores a phenomenon known as Bible journalling, an "active and creative engagement with the material books of the Bible," where readers "draw and make typographic designs directly into their

Bibles, illustrating verses and passages that have particular resonance for them" (153). Analysing several examples through the lens of social semiotics, Dillon explores how gender, agency, and materiality all play a significant role in Bible journalling – indeed, investing the Bible "with even greater materiality" (177).

The essays in Part Two of the volume focus on "Sacred Texts and the Digital Turn". This section begins with two chapters that focus on the significant potential of digital scholarship for the academic study of sacred texts.

In his essay "Monks, Manuscripts, Muhammad, and Digital Editions of the New Testament" (winner of the Society of Biblical Literature's 2018 Paul J. Achtemeier Award for New Testament Scholarship), Garrick Allen investigates how the digital turn can help us reconceptualise critical editions. Using Revelation 13 and the number of the beast as a test case, he explores paratexts and interpretive traditions regarding this famous passage that are embedded in the manuscript traditions, but which are ignored by the critical editions. Allen demonstrates how digital critical editions can account for a greater number of factors, including the materiality of manuscripts, and thus can help us better reflect on the complex relationships between textual production, transmission, exegesis, and reception history.

Alba Fedeli's contribution turns our attention to the Qur'ān ("The Qur'ānic Text from Manuscript to Digital Form: Metalinguistic Markup of Scribes and Editors"). Fedeli begins by exploring how early scribes and redactors dealt with the ambiguity of the Arabic script in early Qur'ānic manuscripts of the seventh to tenth centuries CE, including the introduction of vowel systems and other markers. What emerged was a complex text that embodies various readings, and allows for diverse interpretations. The process of digital editing and coding that has developed in recent decades allows scholars to unravel the multi-layered nature of such manuscripts. Further, Fedeli suggests that the markup systems employed in digital scholarship, which are themselves interpretive, have much in common with the strategies used by ancient scribes and editors, which can also be understood as a form of markup on the text. Taken together, we see how issues of materiality are at the centre of textual research, whether the focus is on ancient manuscripts or digital encoding.

In "Paratexts and the Hermeneutics of Digital Bibles", Joshua Mann takes us into the world of contemporary readers of digital scriptures. Following initial reflections on paratextuality and materiality, Mann investigates the YouVersion Bible App, perhaps the most well known and most widely used digital Bible. Mann outlines how paratextual features which often go unnoticed are in fact key elements in the user's engagement with the digital Bible. While digital Bibles lack a binding cover or consecutive pagination that give coherence to the "canonical" collection, other elements such as dropdown menus and versification point

to continuity with printed Bibles and a uniform text. However, Mann highlights how digital Bibles have their own unique paratexual elements as well, including social features (connections to social media), terms of use, data collection, a "menu bar" for various uses, and notifications and alerts. What emerges is a picture of how digital texts and paratexts are shaping how users engage with the Bible in both overt and less overt ways.

The penultimate chapter from Natalia Suit likewise focuses on contemporary readers of sacred texts, in this instance the Qur'ān ("Virtual Qur'ān: Authenticity, Authority, and Ayat in Bytes"). Suit offers an ethnographic account of how digital technology, particularly as related to the Qur'ān, is shaping the religious practise of Muslims in Egypt. New electronic forms of the Qur'ān have raised debates about the authority of the text, while also revealing ways in which digital texts can have an impact on gendered engagement with the Qur'ān, particularly around issues of ritual purity. Suit highlights how the digital turn is not a dematerialization of the sacred text, but in fact is opening up new avenues for reflection on materiality.

Bradford Anderson's essay concludes the volume with an exploration of "Sacred Texts in a Digital Age: Reflecting on Materiality, Digital Culture, and the Functional Dimensions of Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam". Drawing on the work of James Watts, Anderson explores how the digital turn is impacting the semantic and iconic use of sacred texts in diverse ways. Examples from the media and elsewhere demonstrate that the semantic dimension of scriptural use (content, reading, and interpretation) has been adapted to digital contexts with much greater ease than that of iconicity, which is often bound up with the material form of the codex (swearing of oaths, talismanic properties, book burning, and so on). The essay concludes with some theoretical reflections that help account for the present state of affairs, as well as the coexistence of these material forms.

3 Areas for Further Research

A number of significant themes recur in the essays here collected, and point to areas where there is ample room for further reflection and research. The relationship between the materiality of texts (from layout, to paratexts, to ritual purity) and the religious, social, and cultural factors at work in the background of such texts is highlighted in several of the chapters – from the ancient community at Qumran, to medieval monks in Greece, to contemporary Muslims in Egypt (see the essays from Krauß and Schücking-Jungblut; Batovici; Outhwaite; del Barco;

Poleg; Dillon; Suit; Anderson). There is much more work to be done in exploring how the materiality of sacred texts is bound up with social and cultural factors, across the religious traditions in question. Such examples are also a reminder that form and function are intimately connected, and that if we pay close attention only to the semantic dimension of these texts, we run the risk of missing out on significant data related to the production, use, and reception of these scriptures.

Another thread woven throughout the volume is the role and place of paratexts (see Batovici; Hilali; Poleg; Dillon; Allen; Fedeli; Mann). While paratextual elements have begun to receive greater attention in recent years, due in large part to the work of Genette and others,[10] paratexts remain a largely untapped resource for reflection on the use and transmission of sacred texts.[11] Often ignored in favour of the "main" text, paratexts offer a window into the social life of scriptures – their performance, interpretation, and reception. As a number of contributors point out, we now have the capacity to consider paratextual features as part of our standard engagement with the texts and traditions, and we would be wise to heed this call for more robust engagement with such features.

A more subtle theme that finds expression in this volume is the way in which materiality can alert us to the accessibility of sacred texts. Of particular note in this regard are the essays from Dillon and Suit, which highlight the ways in which new material expressions – in this case Bible journalling and digital texts – allow for women to engage with and to have more agency in their use of sacred texts. Further research is needed on how issues of materiality can highlight the ways in which texts are made accessible (or not) to various groups of people.

Finally, these essays demonstrate how materiality – and transitions between material forms – has been a key element in how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have developed in relationship to one another. While the interplay between scroll and codex, and the socio-cultural issues at work in the adoption or amplification of these forms is the most obvious example of such interaction (see Outhwaite, del Barco, Fedeli), other forms of engagement are also present. These include comparison of the ways in which texts are organised for reading (Batovici), adoption of new techniques gleaned from online communities (Dillon), interpretive traditions that reflect engagement with or response to other traditions (Allen), and the iconic use of scriptures (such as desecration) that reflects larger religious and socio-cultural factors that include but are not limited to religious dimensions

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10 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

11 Martin Wallraff and Patrick Andrist, "Paratexts of the Bible: A New Research Project on Greek Textual Transmission," *Early Christianity* 6 (2015): 237–43.

(Anderson). Further research on how the materiality of sacred texts has played a role in the engagement within and between the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam will no doubt shed important light on intra- and inter-religious engagement, from antiquity to the present day.

My hope is that this volume will draw attention to the significant role which materiality has played – and continues to play – in the production, use, and reception of the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Further, I hope it will inspire continued reflection on materiality, transitions, and liminality within and between these religious traditions, particularly as we witness the continued emergence of digital culture.

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