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Administrative Writing Practices*

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YAHWEH PERFORMS ADMINISTRATIVE WRITING: EXODUS 32:32–33 IN CONTEXT OF ANCIENT ADMINISTRATIVE WRITING PRACTICES*

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INTRODUCTION

In Exodus, Yahweh writes (Exod 24:12; 31:18; 32:15–16; 34:1). Likewise, Mesopotamian literature depicts gods as writing (e.g., Šamaš, Bēlet-šēri, and Nabû). This continuity should be expected. As many scholars of the Hebrew Bible, ancient Near East, and ancient Mediterranean have established, Yahweh and other ancient deities were depicted anthropomorphically as corporeal deities with social ties to their physical environment.¹ This corporeality extended to scribes representing gods performing scribal duties.²

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¹ E.g., Stavrakopoulou 2021; Smith 2016; Bonnet et al. 2022; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik 2015; McClellan 2022, 109–132; Sommer 2009; Grant 2015; Keel and Uehlinger 1998; Hamori 2008, 26 (“the anthropomorphism of biblical depictions of God is inescapable”); Barr 1960; Quick 2022, 351; Marksches 2019 [2016], 19–27; Wagner 2019. For an excellent synthesis of this scholarship, see Wilson 2024. Cf., among others, Spinoza 2020 [1677], 84 (“Many imagine God after the likeness of a man, consisting of body and mind, and liable to passions; but how far such people are from the true knowledge of God, is sufficiently apparent from what has already been demonstrated. Them, however, I pass by; for all who have in any degree contemplated the nature of God, deny that God is corporeal”); Saggs 2016 [1978]; and Maimonides 2024 [1190], 1.34a (“So the vulgar embraced corporealism and many another error in theology . . . , being brought up in a culture based on texts of great authority, whose surface sense treats God corporeally and suggests all sorts of other groundless fantasies”).

² See, e.g., Schaper 2004; Stavrakopoulou 2021.

Certainly, textual evidence indicates a perception that deities could write and thus function as scribes, but calling deities scribes on account of their writing is only one part of this story. So, this article asks a more precise question: in the case of Exod 32:32–33 and Yahweh’s scroll, what type of scribal duty is Yahweh represented as having performed, how does this scribal duty serve as a socio-rhetorical mythmaking strategy, and what are the historical and methodological implications for thinking about writing and scribes in the ancient Near East and Levant? To answer these questions, I focus on what Yahweh’s scroll in Exod 32 reveals about Yahweh performing administrative writing and compare such analysis with how texts represent Egyptian and Mesopotamian deities as performing administrative scribal duties.³ This exploration is aided by theories from book historian Adrian Johns, religion scholars Russel McCutcheon and Bruce Lincoln, and studies on ancient scribes by James Moore, Alice Mandell, and William Schniedewind, amongst others. Through this assemblage of ancient texts and scholars, this article 1) identifies how Judean scribes represented Yahweh performing administrative scribal duties and 2) situates such representations within the broader ancient Near East.

To briefly summarize this article’s central text, Exod 32:32–33 indicates that Yahweh can write. After the Golden Calf narrative, Moses ascends Mount Sinai to obtain Yahweh’s forgiveness for the people’s sin. Moses initially acknowledges the sin that the people committed (Exod 32:31). Subsequently, Moses references a scroll (סֵפֶר) that is maintained by and belongs to Yahweh: “But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if it be not so, blot me out of the scroll that you have written” (Exod 32:32; וְעַתָּה אִם-תִּשָּׂא חֶטְאֵתָם וְאִם-אֵין מַחְיֵי נָא (מִסֵּפֶרְךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ).⁴ Yahweh responds to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my scroll” (Exod 32:33; מִי אֲשֶׁר חָטָא-לִי אֶמְחֶנּוּ מִסֵּפֶרִי כִתְבִי with Yahweh as the subject singular G conjugation of כִּתְבִי with Yahweh as the subject ostensibly indicates that Yahweh wrote the scroll.

In what follows, I first show that while Exod 32:32–33 functions as a socio-rhetorical myth for administrative writing, scholars often historicize Yahweh’s scroll in Exod 32:32–33 1) without attending to real-world, historically situated administrative scribal practices and 2) under the influence of a Christian-centric, “book of life” approach. Second, I show that the verb כָּתַבְתָּ in Exod 32:32–33 indicates that Yahweh wrote his

³ Here and throughout, administrative writing denotes writing that enables a subject “to conduct official business on the basis of written documents” (Goody 1977, 15), an understanding drawn from Weber 1947 and Bendix 1960 and used by Winter 1991, 75.

⁴ On וְאִם-אֵין as “if it be not so,” see GKC 152k and 159v.

scroll and show how Exod 32:32–33 draws attention to Yahweh’s ability to interact with a scroll materially. Third, I situate Yahweh’s scroll and writing in Exod 32:32–33 in the context of ancient administrative writing without numinous, magical power⁵ and demonstrate that Yahweh is a deity who performs, among other duties, administrative writing duties. Finally, I conclude by discussing the broader theoretical and methodological implications in terms of historicizing socio-rhetorical myths about writing within ancient literature and draw attention to the importance of showing how genres are incorporated and manipulated within fictive, literary contexts.

HOW EXOD 32:32–33 FUNCTIONS AS A SOCIO-RHETORICAL MYTH AND ASSOCIATED PROBLEMS

Yahweh’s writing in Exod 32:32–33 is a portion of an ancient Judean and Israelite story that argues for certain assumptions, frameworks, and values surrounding writing (i.e., book history). This observation is based on the theoretical framework of book historian Adrian Johns, who articulates that the assumptions and frameworks surrounding how texts were written, archived, and shared are not intrinsic but are made and argued for through stories.⁶ Whereas Adrian Johns is concerned with how “printers and booksellers themselves fought to create a trustworthy realm of printed knowledge,”⁷ Exod 32:32–33 exemplifies how scribes constructed a narrative to shape how the reader perceived administrative writing.

⁵ Although “numinous” is often understood in relation to Rudolf Otto (1952 [1923])—namely, a “mental state [that] is perfectly sui generis and irreducible to any other” (7) and comprises elements like “creature feeling” (31), “mysterium tremendum” (12), fascination (31), and more—I use the term parallel to magical in the sense within Schniedewind 2004, 24–34, who suggests that non-literates and early societies “had magical notions about writing that were a reflection of the belief that writing was the domain of the divine” (24). In that same chapter, Schniedewind eventually references “the numinous power of the written name” (32). For criticism of Otto’s scholarship as a form of Christian apologetic, see Gooch 2000, 211; Barnes 1994 (“his distinction between non-conceptual and conceptual knowledge is . . . an apologetic device to safeguard the autonomy of religion and protect religious truth claims from rational criticism” [222]); and Alles 2001 (a genealogy of *Das Heilige* “as a late moment in the branch of systematic theology known as apologetics” [324]). For criticism on philosophical grounds, see, e.g., Ryba 1991. For these reasons, I do not attempt to reframe and leverage Otto’s work.

⁶ This view of Exod 32 follows the book history approach outlined in Johns 1998, 1–57. For a concise summary and application of the framework by a biblical scholar, see Mastnjak 2023, 3–4. For a similar approach drawing attention to “reliable reflections of social reality among [scribal] artistic or ideological elements” as opposed to “historical reality,” see Moore 2017.

⁷ Johns 1998, 24.

This narrative construction is akin to the notion of socio-rhetorical mythmaking. Alan Lenzi defines socio-rhetorical mythmaking as “a socio-rhetorical strategy that various social groups (social formations) use to authorize their existence, values, institutions, and . . . texts.”⁸ Lenzi links this theoretical framework to Bruce Lincoln’s work and suggests that “mythmaking is a socio-rhetorical strategy,”⁹ and such a strategy involves “claims that are made by their narrators and the way in which those claims are received by their audience(s).”¹⁰ Applying socio-rhetorical mythmaking to Exod 32, Yahweh’s actions authorize the existence and values of administrative scribes. On account of the fictive “narrative construction of a past” in Exod 32,¹¹ we can reasonably assume that such socio-rhetorical mythmaking was intended to help shape how the audience of Exod 32 perceived administrative writing,¹² especially within the broader constellation of writing activities in Exodus.¹³

In addition to applying book history and socio-rhetorical mythmaking to Exod 32, the scholarly act of historicizing (i.e., theorizing) is the attempt to “contextualize and redescribe” the discourse of socio-rhetorical mythmaking as “human constructs.”¹⁴ That is, the writers of Exod 32 construct this narrative by drawing from their social and cultural context, and scholars can uncover and understand the elements from which

⁸ Lenzi 2008, 18, citing McCutcheon 2003, 88.

⁹ Lenzi 2008, 18.

¹⁰ Lenzi 2008, 18–19, citing Lincoln 1989, 24. Similarly, see Martin 2012, 93–116.

¹¹ For details concerning Exodus and the portrayal of Moses as ancient historical fiction, see Stackert 2014, 51, who cites Marc Brettler’s discussion on creating history (Brettler 1995, 135–144). On the distinction between natural discourse and fictive discourse, see Smith 1978, 14–40. This article uses the term myth in these aforementioned senses (per Hughes and McCutcheon 2022, 152–153).

¹² See Winter 1991 for a similar approach to Ur III seals drawing on image and legend as “a public statement of legitimate authority” (60) for the administrative bureaucracy. Similarly, see Michalowski 1991, 54, on naming patterns within the Ur III bureaucracy as a means of authorizing one’s administrative role. Michalowski 1991 also addresses how Sumerian “myths perpetuated certain concepts of eternal cosmic order,” which “helped to define membership in an exclusive club—the world of the bureaucracy” (52).

¹³ The constellation of writing activities includes, e.g., Yahweh writing on stone tablets (Exod 24:12; 31:18; 32:15–16; 34:1, 28), Moses helping write the stone tablets (Exod 34:28), “autonomous lists embedded into the narrative and the use of lists to create a literary text” (Schniedewind 2019, 87–94) within the Pentateuch and elsewhere, and the role of writing upon objects within Exodus. Analyzing the entire constellation, though, is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁴ McCutcheon 2003, 139.

the scribes draw. In the case of Exod 32, the scholarly goal is to historicize how scribes constructed the socio-rhetorical mythmaking in Exod 32 by redescribing, contextualizing, and understanding the narrative in the context of ancient Near Eastern administrative writing practices.¹⁵

Ironically, poor historicization often reshapes, transforms, and integrates an ancient socio-rhetorical myth (Exod 32:32–33) into a modern socio-rhetorical myth that is a product of twentieth-century scholarship, not the ancient world. This cycle is apparent in how scholars have read Yahweh's scroll in Exod 32:32–33, historicized it as a book of life within the broader umbrella of heavenly books, and subsequently established it as a socio-rhetorical myth within Christian environments. Although scholars commonly organize content along the lines of heavenly books, this study focuses on L. Koep's entry in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (RAC) as an exemplary case study on account of 1) the encyclopedic nature of his RAC entry (i.e., students learn from and scholars cite encyclopedias as knowledge repositories), 2) the relatively early date (1954) of RAC that may reflect an attempt to synthesize broader trends, and 3) the foundational use of Koep's entry in the entry for סֵפֶר in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (ThWAT) published in 1986, which itself is commonly used in biblical scholarship and is more commonly known in the Eerdmans translation *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT), published in 1999.¹⁶

Koep constructs a modern socio-rhetorical myth that perpetuates Christian theological readings of Exod 32:32–33 by linking Yahweh's scroll to a Christian book of life and heavenly books. In Koep's entry "Buch IV (himmlisch)" into RAC (1954), Koep's story assumes without justification a motif of heavenly books at the expense of real-world, historically situated scribal practices. He observes that divine bookkeepers appear in all ancient religions of the ancient Near East, and he neatly divides the books into three categories (heavenly books about creation, world management, and last judgment) and three types (books of fate, books of works, and books of life). When he lays out the various examples of heavenly books from the ancient Near East, Judaism, the New Testament, the

¹⁵ The framework of socio-rhetorical mythmaking and historicizing should not be understood in the sense of an imagined community (Anderson 2006). While socio-rhetorical mythmaking and historicizing undoubtedly contribute to aspects of what constitutes an imagined community, this article uses this theoretical framework to focus on one element of ancient Israel, namely, its perception of scribes and writing. That said, I welcome scholars to bring this work into conversation with imagined communities to show how perceptions of writing may have shaped group identity.

¹⁶ Koep 1954. For TDOT, see Hossfeld and Reuter 1999, 339. For the original in ThWAT, see Hossfeld and Reuter 1986.

church fathers, and Christian liturgy, he does not detail any primary text beyond a passing reference, thereby failing to historicize the content. In failing to historicize the content, Koep instead reflects (and perhaps establishes) a socio-rhetorical myth within the scholarly community about heavenly books. His entry thereby synthesizes a broader pattern of failing to link heavenly books to the historically situated scribal norms and practices of the ancient world. Others follow in his footsteps and use the so-called heavenly books as a distinct analytical category without consideration of the historically situated, real-world scribal practices.¹⁷

In doing so, Koep, among others, perpetuates a theologically inflected view of Yahweh's scroll as connected to the New Testament's "book of life." Since at least Augustine, Christian interpreters have primarily linked the scroll in Exod 32:32–33 to the notion of eternal salvation, and "only occasionally did anyone question whether the 'book of life' in the New Testament sense was intended."¹⁸ Unfortunately, even Koep continues this sense of the scroll as related to a heavenly list of citizens in the New Testament sense: "Three types can be identified, of which the 'Book of Destiny' and the Books of Works are common to all religions, while the 'Book of Life', in the sense of a heavenly list of citizens, turns out to be a biblical-Christian metaphor."¹⁹ In perpetuating and constructing this socio-rhetorical myth in the vein of Christian traditions, Koep

¹⁷ For those who do not align the scroll with a book of life or heavenly motif but still do not connect the scroll to first-millennium BCE scribal practices, see, e.g., Hossfeld and Reuter 1999; Murphy 1881, 214; Dozeman 2009, 632; Durham 2015, 432; Baynes 2012; Schiffman 2004; and Propp 2006, 564–565 ("possible references include 17:4; Isa 4:3; 65:6; Jer 17:1, 13; Ezek 2:9–10; Zech 5:1–4; Mal 3:16; Ps 40:8; 51:3; 56:9; 69:29; 109:14; 139:16; Dan 7:10; Neh 13:14). Paul 1973, 345, does "demonstrate the belief in the existence of heavenly ledgers or in divine scribal activity also in the Bible," albeit at the expense of implying a transhistorical phenomenon that does not account for nuances. Additionally, although Koester 2014, 315, notes a handful of scroll imagery analogies in Greco-Roman practices regarding registering a child's birth, listing the dead, and removing individuals from a list when they are convicted to die, he does not distinguish between these various administrative practices in relation to what he designates the "the scroll," and for Koester, the scroll of life that appears in Revelation is, by implication, the very same scroll that appears in Exod 32:32, Ps 69:28, Isa 4:3, Dan 12:1, multiple second temple period and New Testament texts, and Josephus, albeit with different assumptions of what is within the scroll. For a general comment that Paul 1973 needs additional clarification, see Lämmerhirt and Zgoll 2009–2011, 153.

¹⁸ Childs 1974, 578.

¹⁹ Koep 1954, 725. In German: "Es lassen sich drei Typen nachweisen, von denen das 'Schicksalsbuch' und die 'Bücher der Werke' allen Religionen gemeinsam sind, während sich das 'Buch des Lebens' im Sinne einer himmlischen Bürgerliste als biblisch-christlichen Metaphor erweist."

anachronistically injects distinctly Christian ideas into a distinctly non-Christian text and authorizes Christian groups who construct their identities through this socio-rhetorical myth-making strategy.²⁰

DID YAHWEH WRITE THE SCROLL IN EXOD 32:32–33?

The first step to historicizing Yahweh's scroll and writing in Exod 32:32–33 within its ancient context is to examine what ancient writers assumed about their broader social and historical contexts and, in turn, how that likely influenced how Yahweh's writing is represented in Exod 32:32–33.²¹ An initial question to consider is whether Yahweh wrote the scroll or another entity wrote the scroll. This question is necessary because multiple Semitic languages use a verb for “to write” that can refer to a subject authorizing a written text but not necessarily writing the text (e.g., in the Hebrew Bible, Deut 24:1, Deut 17:18–20, and Hosea 8:12; in Akkadian, the verbs *šaṭāru* and *šapāru*;²² and in other Northwest Semitic languages [discussed below]). The major dictionaries do not make such distinctions for כִּתֵּב.²³ In order to enable a clear distinction be-

²⁰ This idea is especially fruitful for twentieth-century Christian confessional scholars who use Exod 32:32 and the so-called book of life to assert it as part of a broader salvation history. See, e.g., von Rad 1962 and Eichrodt 1967. For a criticism of von Rad and the general approach to ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible through a lens of salvation history, see Saggs 2016 (1978), 64–69. Also, see Bietenhard 1951, 231–252, who discusses a “book of life” in Exod 32 only as a means to primarily discuss the “book of life” in early Judaism and early Christianity. Interestingly, *Oxford English Dictionary* captures the sense of writing in relation to a book of life: “In Middle English often (and sometimes in later use) in spiritual contexts with reference to God, the Devil, etc., recording a person's name amongst those destined for heaven or hell” (*OED*, “write, II.4.b”), citing Old English texts as early as 1175 CE. In this vein, see Kaiser 1915, 503.

²¹ For a similar goal situated in the late first millennium BCE, see Mroczek 2016.

²² E.g., *CAD* 17, part 2, s.v. “*šaṭāru*,” meaning “1. to write, to copy, to put down in writing, to inscribe a tablet or other object, to formulate a (legal) document, 2. to issue a legal document, to deed by means of a written document, to decree in writing . . . 6. *šuwṭuru* to have a tablet written, copied, to have a monument, an object inscribed, to have a mark placed on the exta, to have a legal document made out, to have registered, recorded.” Additionally, *CAD* 17, part 1, s.v. “*šapāru*,” meaning “1. to send a person, to convey goods, animals, to send against, 2. to send word, to send a report, a message to write, 3. to order, give orders, to command, to administer, to control, to govern, rule, 4. III (causative to mng. 2).”

²³ *HALOT*, s.v. “כִּתֵּב,” distinguishes between the meanings “to write (עָל) upon,” “to put down in writing,” “to cover with writing,” “to write a book” “כִּי with acc.,” and “misc.” for the G stem; “to be written,” “to be written down, to be recorded,” and “to be recorded by writing,” and “to be ordered by writing” in the N stem; and “to write constantly” in the D stem.

tween a subject authorizing a written text as opposed to actually writing, this study uses the terms “authorizing”/ “to authorize”/ “authorizer” (a subject taking ownership of a written text’s content without having physically written it) and “writing”/ “to write”/ “writer” (a subject physically writing a text).²⁴ As such, the first step to situating the writing in Exod 32:32–33 within the broader sociohistorical assumptions is to consider the semantics of “to write” via other West Semitic languages using the verbal root *kth*.

Notably, *kth* is exceedingly rare in Ugaritic evidence. Only one use of *kth* appears in the Ugaritic dictionaries Haag cites.²⁵ Of the Hebrew ostraca and inscriptions, a handful use כִּתֵּב. They are insufficient in detail to determine whether the verb indicates “authorize” or “write,” and the latter is most likely.²⁶

See also BDB, s.v., “כָּתַב,” with the definitions “write,” “write down, describe in writing,” “register, enroll,” “record the number,” and “decree” in the G stem; “be written” or “be written down, recorded” in the N stem; and in the D stem “to write frequently.” No entry provides a meaning of “to authorize” in the sense of writing to approve a message. While to “decree” (G stem) and “to be ordered by writing” (N stem) come close to “to authorize,” they are not quite the same.

²⁴ The decision to use the terms “authorize” and “write” is derived from Aramaic parallels, which are discussed below. Additionally, although the language of “scribe” might be helpful, Alice Mandell draws attention to the fact that the focus on scribes in the Hebrew Bible often stems from “the scholarly search for the linguistic, religious, and historical origins of Israel” (Mandell 2023, 97). Moreover, from an Egyptology perspective, precisely what constitutes “scribal” or who is a “scribe” is not always clear: “When we begin to acknowledge that other hands could hold writing equipment without their owners calling themselves scribes, the picture becomes much more complicated. Making matters worse, once we introduce questions of perception and intentionality, objects turn even more stubbornly mute. Even if a scribe happened to hold them and write, they rarely tell whether he saw himself as doing so, and whether he perceived his action as specifically scribal” (Mandell 2023, 96, citing Allon and Navratilova 2007, 12). For this reason, this article focuses primarily on using a term directly connected to the explicit verb. Note as well the trend of placing “scribe” and “writing” in different portions of modern encyclopedias, even though those categories are deeply interrelated and go hand in hand (e.g., Demsky 2007a on scribes vs. Demsky 2007b on writing). Dahlgren, Leiwo, and Vierros 2024, 8, seem to avoid this issue by using the term scribe to “encompass anyone who records information, whether a professional scribe, a semi-literate individual, or a member of the same household.” This use of “scribe” falls into the same trap as the phrase “Everything is political,” where if everything is political, the category “political” loses its power. Likewise, if everyone who records information is scribal, then the categories “scribe” and “scribal” lose their power.

²⁵ Aistleitner 1967, no. 1400, and Gordon 1965, no. 1320. The verb does not appear in the glossaries of more recent Ugaritic grammars, such as Schniedewind and Hunt 2007 and Bordreuil and Pardee 2009.

²⁶ With Elyashib as the addressee, including Arad No. 1 (כָּתַב שֵׁם הַיָּם);

In Phoenician, *ktb* appears in two inscriptions, but neither offers sufficient evidence to distinguish the semantics of *ktb*.²⁷ In Punic, *ktb* appears in a small range of texts. A handful of texts reflect *ktb* as meaning “to write,” such as *RÉS* 1543 (“I wrote [KTBT] forty-three MSPRM”),²⁸ *KAI* 145:6 (“I wrote” regarding the inscription itself),²⁹ and *CIS* i 6000 (“Following the facsimile [MKTB]) and the drawing, I inscribed [KTBT]) his name at the top of the pediment” and “I engraved her epitaph, in-

2MS imperative) and Arad No. 7 (ו[ן]כתבתה לפניך); either a 2MS with *plene* spelling or a 2MS with a 3MS pronominal accusative suffix meaning “you will write [it?] in your records [lit: before you]”). In Lachish No. 4, the speaker claims to have written what the addressee sent (כתבת). In Lachish No. 6, the speaker asks whether Yaush will write to troops (הלא תכתב). Regarding the Khirbet el-Qôm inscription, Uriyahu the governor wrote it (אריהו ה?שר כתבה). Text and quotations are from Ahituv 2008, 92, 221, 70, and 80, respectively.

²⁷ *DNWSL*, “ktb₁.” The first inscription is *KAI* 43:13 (*RÉS* 1211), which is a 13-line pedestal inscription from a village near Cyprus. In this inscription, whether *ktb* is necessarily present is questionable. On account of a break in the inscription, line 13 can be transcribed as follows: תבת ... וסמדת בפר אש בן מנחת חגי ופעלת אנך עלת [אש כ] תבת, which results in the phrase אש כתבת, “which I have written.” *KAI* 43:13 follows Clermont-Ganneau with the transcription תבת[אש כ]. Clermont-Ganneau’s reconstruction makes sense based on how he interprets the words וסמדת בקר, “I have nailed on the wall” (Cooke 1903, 87). Cooke, in line with another scholar, suggests that the preferred translation of וסמדת בקר is “and a yoke of oxen” by parallel with וַיִּצְמַד בָּקָר (1 Sam 11:7; 1 Kings 19:21; Job 42:12). Since Cooke’s preferred translation seems better fitting on account of the context of sacrificial animals within the inscription but does include anything about a written object, his interpretation casts doubt on Clermont-Ganneau’s reconstruction “which I have written” (Cooke 1903, 87). For the sake of conversation, though, if Clermont-Ganneau’s reconstruction is correct, the verb כתבת in *KAI* 43:13 aligns well with the speaker of the inscription, namely, Yathan-Baal, as having had authorized the inscription, not as having had written the inscription. Even so, this evidence should be used with caution due to the broken nature of *KAI* 43:13. Beyond *KAI* 43:13, the only other known Phoenician inscriptions with the root *ktb* is *KAI* 60:4 from the first century BCE. Here, the speakers (the Sidonian assembly) reference that the elected temple officials ought to inscribe (לכתב) the decree (i.e., the text itself), “upon a gold stele” (Krahmalkov 1987, 79). This text is somewhat ambiguous as to whether the elected temple officials will personally write/inscribe the gold stele and thus offers no support for *ktb* as authorizing vs. writing.

²⁸ Krahmalkov 1993, 38, suggests that the inscription writer understood the verb KTBT as a first-common singular verb, whereas the writer of the instructions only intended a second-person masculine singular verb for the inscription writer, such that it should not have been included on the inscription.

²⁹ Cooke 1903, 152.

serting [KTB] it on this tablet”).³⁰ Like with the Phoenician and Ugaritic evidence, though, the data is too sparse to make a strong argument regarding whether and when *kth* can mean “to authorize” as opposed to “to write.” However, where the evidence for *kth* as both “to authorize” and “to write” becomes substantial is with regard to Aramaic administrative evidence, to which Judeans and Israelites would have been exposed in the first millennium BCE.³¹

The strongest evidence for distinguishing between the meaning “authorize” and “write” in Aramaic derives from *TAD* A6.2, more commonly known as the Elephantine ‘Aršāma decree. This administrative document, Moore argues, reflects multiple writers. The initial writer provides the petition to be escalated through the Persian administrative bureaucracy, and the document’s speaker is distinct from the scribe. The second writer writes “PN wrote” (כתב), the third writer writes a personal name followed “by an undecipherable statement,” the fourth writer writes “PN wrote” (כתב), the fifth writer writes “PN wrote” (כתב), and the sixth writer provides an additional administrative note. Moore concludes that the repetition of כתב indicates that the phrase should be interpreted as “PN signed off (on the document),” which means more concisely “PN authorized (the document).”³²

Another illustration of this is that Aramaic letters from Elephantine use the verb *kth* to indicate writing and authorizing. For example, consider a letter concerning a deed about a portico that had been built in Elephantine and the building

³⁰ Ferron 1966, 78.

³¹ This article does not consider how the verbs *šatāru* and *šapāru* shed light on כתיב. Such contact between Judeans/Israelites and Aramaic is most readily evident in 2 Kings 18:26a, where Elyakim responds to Assyria, “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic because we understand it” (דַּבֵּר לָנוּ בְּאַרְמֵיָא). More generally, scholars indicate that contact with Aramaic administrative practices is certain due to Aramaic being the lingua franca and Hebrew speakers’ exposure to Aramaic. For a full summary, see Gzella 2015, 102–103, 153–156, 208–211. See also, e.g., Schaper 1995; Van De Mieroop 2023, 151–171; Sanders 2017, 153–195; Sanders 2019, 176 (“By the late Persian period, all scribes in Judea and many or most scribes in the rest of the Near East learned to write first in Aramaic; if they wanted to draw up legal documents or petition the governor, they had better”); Niehr 2018; Moore 2023, 68, who indicates that indicate “that a reform occurred among the administrators at al-Yahudu” during the Neo-Babylonian period and highlights Hebrew administrators becoming “cultured into the Aramaic speaking setting of Babylonia” or high-level Aramaic administrators supplanting Hebrew administrators; Moore 2020; van der Toorn 2019, 21–88; Fröhlich 2024; Schniedewind 2004, 174–178; Rollston 2015, 91. Close contact between the Hebrew administrative community and the Aramaic administrative community thus serves as a potential vector for Aramaic practices and verbal semantics impacting Hebrew.

³² All translations and quotes from Moore 2020, 56–58.

rights of Ḳoniya bar Zadok's neighbor (471 BCE).³³ At the end of the letter before the witness list, we read: "Palatiah b. Ahio wrote this document at the dictation of Ḳoniya" (line 15; **כתב** **כפם** **קוניה** **פלטיה בר אחיו ספרא זנה כפם קוניה**). The verb **כתב** in line 15 unambiguously points to Palatiah as the writer. However, a few lines later, we read the endorsement: "Deed (relating to) the portico which he built, which Ḳoniya wrote for Maḥseh" (line 20; **ספר אגרא זי בנה זי כתב קוניה למחסה**). Having already defined the writer as Palatiah (line 15), the verb **כתב** in line 20 must mean "authorized a text." That is, Palatiah wrote (**כתב**) the document/deed (**ספרא**), but Ḳoniya authorized the writing of (**כתב**) the document/deed (**ספר**). Aside from the broader letter, the primary difference between lines 15 and 20 is that whereas *ktb* in line 15 is paired "at the dictation (**כפם**) of Ḳoniya,"³⁴ line 20 is paired with the preposition **ל** plus a personal name (**למחסה**). Using *ktb* with two distinct meanings is common in legal letters from the Elephantine papyri (Cowley 1923, nos. 2:15, 18; 6:16, 22; 14:11, 14; 25:17, 20; 28:14, 17; no. 13: 9, 17). Evidently, *ktb* in Elephantine Aramaic could indicate that a subject wrote (**כתב**) the text/document or that a subject authorized (**כתב**) a text/document which another subject wrote (**כתב**).

Importantly, this ambiguity is not isolated to the Elephantine and Egyptian papyri and is evident in other Northwest Semitic examples. For example, a handful of ostraca from Idumea reflect *ktb* as meaning "PN authorized." According to Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, "of more than 1,000 commodity chits, fewer than half a dozen indicate the writer at the end with a notation such as 'Qosyatha wrote' (A4.32, 8.27, 19.5), 'Zabdadah wrote' (A9.31 = 8.46), or 'Netina wrote' (A17.8) . . . But none of these three figures is titled 'scribe' (**ספרא**)," a term that only appears in a single ostrakon (B.1.1).³⁵ One possible explanation for the sparse use of **כתב** and **ספרא** in the Idumea ostraca is that the scribe was not perceived as a prestigious role in Idumea,³⁶ a view that contrasted with the perception of scribes in Egyptian Aramaic documentation.³⁷

³³ Cowley 1923, no. 5.

³⁴ Instead of **כפם**, **על פם** can appear and have the same meaning "at the dictation of" (Cowley 1923, 15).

³⁵ Porten and Yardeni 2020, 53–54.

³⁶ Singular reference to a scribe (**ספרא**) in 1,000+ commodity chits suggests the relatively low status of scribes in Idumea. The presence of a single name scribe among the Idumea ostraca in B1.1 (**הב לשבי ספרא תבן**) is likely elevated due to his role as a recipient of the chaff, not due to his role as a scribe. See Porten and Yardeni 2020, 53.

³⁷ "While the scribes of the Elephantine contracts always signed their names . . ., the scribes of our chits remained anonymous" (Porten and Yardeni 2018, 379). Similarly, In the Aramaic papyri from Egypt, "the scribe is well documented, both in upper echelons (such as Aḥiqar [TAD

As such, using the verb **כתב** with the subjects Qosyatha, Zabdadah, and Netina likely indicates that they authorized such ostraca, and whether they actually wrote such ostraca is not necessarily important, as ostrakon writers are seldom mentioned in the Idumea ostrakon corpus. This use of **כתב** thus demonstrates that while **כתב** could simultaneously mean “to write” and “to authorize,” it sometimes could simply mean “to authorize.”

With this broader context, we can now consider the semantics of **כתב** in Biblical Hebrew. While a handful of examples may reflect **כתב** as the authorizing of a text, such use does not seem to be at play here and is generally uncommon. Of the 223 occurrences of the root **כ-ת-ב** in a verb, only a few examples may represent the verbal subject as authorizing a text rather than explicitly writing the text. These examples use the same syntax as described for the Aramaic Elephantine documents. Deuteronomy 24:1–3 describes how a man can divorce a woman. In particular, he must “write a document of divorce for her, give it into her hands, and send her from his household” (**וְכָתַב לָהּ סֵפֶר כְּרִיתוֹת וְנָתַן בְּיָדָהּ וְשָׁלְחָהּ מִבֵּיתוֹ**). The subject of the verbs is **אִישׁ**, a man. Since we know that not every man in ancient Israel could write, this verb must mean “to authorize.” So, he must “authorize a document of divorce for her.” Moreover, Deuteronomy 24:1–3 is unique because the verb **וְכָתַב** takes the dative marker **לָהּ**, the preposition **ל** plus a 3FS suffix meaning “for her,” which is the same pattern evident in the Aramaic letters from Elephantine for places where **כ-ת-ב** has the sense “to authorize!”³⁸ (Typically, the verb **כָּתַב** takes the preposition **עַל** to describe the object upon which something is written.³⁹) The verb **כָּתַב** + **ל** + a pronominal suffix only appears elsewhere in Deuteronomy 17:18–20 and Hosea 8:12. In the former, upon taking the throne, a king is either to “write for himself the copy of this law upon a scroll” or to “authorize for himself the copy of this law upon a scroll” (**וְכָתַב לוֹ אֶת־מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל־סֵפֶר**). In light of the rarity of the verb **כָּתַב** + **ל** + a pronominal suffix, translating **וְכָתַב** as “he shall authorize for himself” is preferable. Similarly, Hosea 8:12 features Yahweh speaking about how Israel rejected his instruction (**תּוֹרָה**) even after having written (**אָכְתוּב**) it. As with the previous two examples, though, the preposition **ל** appears

C1.1:1, etc.] and the scribe in the Arsames correspondence [TAD A6.8–13]) and in the lower levels (such as scribes of the province [TAD A6.1:1, 6] and scribes of the treasury [TAD B4.3:11–14]), to say nothing of the scribes of the legal contracts (Porten-Lund 2002: 244). They are also evidenced as writers of ordinary receipts on ostraca, such as ‘Joseph the scribe who wrote’ a salt receipt (TAD D8.13:3)” (Porten and Yardeni 2020, 54).

³⁸ For a discussion, see the previous paragraphs.

³⁹ *HALOT*, s.v. “**כתב**.”

immediately after the verb with a 3MS suffix (לו), suggesting either “I write for him [i.e., Ephraim] the multitude of my instructions” or “I authorize for him [i.e., Ephraim] the multitude of my instructions” (אֶכְתֹּב לוֹ רַבּוֹ תוֹרָתִי). Based on the previous discussion, the latter seems preferable. Again, this pattern may appear in Daniel 6:26 to characterize King Darius as authorizing a message to all people.⁴⁰ So, where כָּתַב connotes “to authorize” occurs in the syntactic structure of the verb כָּתַב + ל + a pronominal suffix, and the remaining uses of כָּתַב appear to simply mean “to write.”⁴¹ This observation is applicable to Exod 32:32–33: Yahweh wrote the scroll.

Further accentuating Yahweh as the writer, and not the authorizer, of his scroll is the representation of Yahweh as capable of interacting with and modifying the scroll at a material level. As Moses addresses Yahweh, he asks that Yahweh blot him out from the book (מָחֵנִי, “blot me out”; G Imp. 2CS with 1CS suffix), and Yahweh responds that he will only blot out those who sin against him (אֶמְחֶנּוּ, “I will blot out”; G 1CS PC with a 3MS suffix). In this context, the verbs from the root מֶחַה imply Yahweh’s wiping and/or blotting names from his סֵפֶר.⁴² Such a practice was common on papyrus in the ancient world.⁴³ Moreover, in Northwest Semitic inscriptions, the root m-ḥ-y involves effacing names from written objects with the intent of erasing the memory of the dead (i.e., the name) from

⁴⁰ בִּאדְוִין דְּרִיּוּשׁ מִלְכָּא כָּתַב לְכָל-עַמְמַיָּא אֲמַיָּא

⁴¹ Many uses of כָּתַב are passive; however, these are not relevant to this study. Additionally, while some texts depict political figures writing (e.g., 2 Sam 11:14–15 and Kings 21:9–11), the texts do not clearly indicate that the verb means “to authorize.”

⁴² BDB, s.v. “מָחָה”: “wipe . . . Moses’ name from the book (מִסְפָּר) of God.” Cf. *HALOT*, s.v. “מָחָה I,” which groups this occurrence of מֶחַה with “to wipe out, annihilate: names.”

⁴³ On palimpsest papyri and the act of erasing text on papyri, see Caminos 1986, who highlights first-hand evidence that the erasure process more complex, that plain water could not simply erase a text: written documents “had been stored away in a room; rain leaked into it, fell on the writings, and presumably made them adhere to one another, for after being rescued they had to be ‘loosened up again, when it was found that ‘they had not been deleted’ or ‘erased’ . . . by the mishap. In other words, the water had not removed or at least not seriously impaired the ink” (Caminos 1986, 45). For a thorough discussion of blotting out the tetragrammaton in medieval Hebrew Bible manuscripts, see Gordon 2020a and Gordon 2020b. For additional examples of the materiality of writing in the first and second millennia BCE, see Tov 2001, 201–207, on the Hebrew Bible and Parkinson and Quirke 1995, 49–52, on erasing text on papyri in Egypt.

the living,⁴⁴ akin to Akkadian *pasāsu* and *pašātu*.⁴⁵ Exod 32:32–33 parallels such acts of erasing names from a physical object.⁴⁶ Thus, Exod 32:32–33 demonstrates Yahweh as a corporeal participant in the writing enterprise and thereby pushes us toward understanding כָּתַבְתָּ as “you wrote” as opposed to “you authorized.”⁴⁷

Before returning to an alternative to Yahweh’s scroll as part of the heavenly book motif, a brief summary: although *ktb* can mean “to authorize” or “to write,” the verb typically appears in Biblical Hebrew with the meaning “to write.” As such, Exod 32:32–33 represents Yahweh as writing. This point is accentuated through Yahweh’s corporeal interaction with his scroll. At this point, I shift from the now-resolved question of “to write” vs. “to authorize” and instead focus on the contexts

⁴⁴ See *DNWSI*, mhy1. First, *KAI* 26A: “if a man, who is a man of renown, who shall erase the name of Azatiwada from this gate, and shall place (his) name (on it)” (“The Azatiwada Inscription,” trans. K. Lawson Younger, Jr. [*COS* 2.31]). The root applied to effacing Azatiwada’s name is metaphorically extended to what Ba’al Shamem, El, Shemesh, and the children of the gods will do to the kingdom of the individual who effaces Azatiwada’s name: “erase that kingdom, and that king, and that man who is a man of renown” (“The Azatiwada Inscription,” trans. K. Lawson Younger, Jr. [*COS* 2.31]). Second, the Ahirom sarcophagus concerns effacing the name of a king who usurps and appropriates the royal tomb upon his death (Suriano 2010, 107) (*KAI* 12): “And as for him, may his inscription be effaced with the double edge of a chisel” (“The Sarcophagus Inscription of ‘Ahirom, King of Byblos,” trans. P. Kyle McCarter [*COS* 2.55]). Third, while וְמָחוּ appears in an ivory inscription, the context is broken: “[will co]me and they will erase [this inscription] wh[ich]” (Ahituv 2008, 329 [“An Inscription on an Ivory from Calah”]). Fourth, one who effaces an inscription is to be cursed: “Cursed be whoever effaces” (Ahituv 2008, 237 [“Inscription from a Cave Near En-Gedi”]). In each case, effacing a name involves erasing the memory of one who is already dead. In the Exodus narrative, the sinners whose names Yahweh erases are not dead; however, the tendency to associate the verb מָחָה with the dead rhetorically intensifies the situation: Yahweh treats the living as if they were dead.

⁴⁵ *CAD* 12, s.v. “*pasāsu*,” occasionally means “to obliterate an inscription,” but it more frequently involves voiding agreements or voiding a party’s wrongdoing. *CAD* 12, s.v. “*pašātu*,” more frequently denotes effacing one’s name as a means of erasing memory.

⁴⁶ The LXX translator picks this up as well, translating וְמָחָה as ἐξάλειψόν με. In Attic Greek, ἐξάλειψω can mean “wipe out” and appears in the context of wiping a name off of a roll or canceling inventory. See LSJ, s.v. “ἐξάλειψω.” The word can also mean “to obliterate.” In addition to LSJ, see Gurtner 2013, 453.

⁴⁷ Baynes 2012, 34, is partially correct that the language “my scroll” and “your scroll” imply Yahweh’s authorship. Baynes comments, “The book (סֵפֶר) belongs to the Lord, who is probably to be understood as its author.” However, the designation “author” carries many modern connotations and may erase, pun intended, the complex nature of scroll production that Exodus 32 seems aware of.

within which *ktb* is applied. In particular, I show that Yahweh's actions in Exod 32:32–33 align with the scribal administrative enterprise, not the heavenly book motif that has been applied to Exod 32:32–33.

SITUATING YAHWEH WITHIN ANCIENT ADMINISTRATIVE WRITING

Administrative writing is the touchstone for properly situating Yahweh's writing and erasing/blotting in Exod 32:32–33, and Exod 32:32–33 indicates that Yahweh's scroll is primarily an administrative document.⁴⁸ Administrative writing denotes writing that enables a subject “to conduct official business on the basis of written documents” (Goody 1977, 15). In this sense, this article considers an important alternative to standard interpretations. Scholars often discuss scribal practices in order to determine 1) whether the scribe was part of the temple or palace and 2) which scribes were responsible for the writing of the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁹ However, Exod 32:32–33 is a socio-rhetorical myth that situates Yahweh as performing administrative writing neither in the palace nor in the temple but presumably in a place inaccessible to humans. To that end, I move beyond the temple–palace discussion and consider how Yahweh performs administrative writing in Exod 32:32–33 and the Hebrew Bible more broadly. Additionally, I draw from ancient Mesopotamian data.

In particular, Exod 32:32–33 indicates that the blotting out of the scroll serves as a means by which Yahweh knows who to smite.⁵⁰ Immediately after the interaction between Yahweh and Moses regarding the scroll (Exod 32:32–33), Yahweh comments in Exod 32:34, “Now, go and lead the people to the place which I told you about; look here, my messenger is going before you. And in the day of my punishing, I will punish them for their sin” (וַעֲתָה לֵךְ נַחֵה אֶת־הָעָם אֶל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּרְתִּי לְךָ הַיּוֹם (מִלְאָכִי יֵלֵךְ לִפְנֶיךָ וּבַיּוֹם פִּקְדִי וּפְקֻדָּתִי עֲלֵהֶם חֲטָאתָם). The clause structure here is a simple expression of time (וּבַיּוֹם) plus a waw-retentive suffix conjugation (וּפְקֻדָּתִי). This is a structure wherein “the perfect consecutive occurs as the apodosis to

⁴⁸ On the importance of administrative writing more generally, see Schniedewind 2024, 35–74. As a point of comparison, Pearce 1995, 2273, posits that administrative duties comprised 70% of scribal duties for Mesopotamian scribes.

⁴⁹ E.g., after a brief foray into the semantics of סֹפֵר in Biblical Hebrew and biblical Aramaic, Karel van der Toorn (2007, 82) focuses on “which scribes were responsible for the writing of the Hebrew Bible.” He subsequently engages with well-known scholarship (e.g., Lipinski 1988, 159–161; Weinfeld 1992, 158–171; and Schniedewind 2004, 90).

⁵⁰ In a conversation, Eric J. Harvey suggested that Yahweh eventually smites everybody who is not on the list.

temporal clauses or their equivalents” and can be used “to announce future actions or events.”⁵¹ That Exod 32:34 references a future event is first evident in the text that follows this announcement of future action, where the day of punishing occurs: “So, Yahweh smote the people on account that they had made the calf, which Aaron had made” (Exod 32:35; וַיִּגַּף יְהוָה אֶת־הָעָם עַל־אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֶת־הָעֵגֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֹהֶרֶן). Thus, the fact that individual names were blotted out from Yahweh’s scroll was not in and of itself what caused the people to experience death and smiting.⁵² Rather, Yahweh performed and implemented actions based on the updated administrative scroll.⁵³ As such, in this narrative context, the scroll is better understood as an administrative record that Yahweh could use to identify who should and should not be punished for sin.⁵⁴ To that end, Exod 32:32–33 represents Yahweh as a writing administrator, albeit one who is also the deity and judge who implements changes and acts per the administrative documentation (Exod 32:34–35).⁵⁵ Put another way, Yahweh plays multi-

⁵¹ GKC 112 oo. Similarly, *IBHS* 32.2.5c: “The *weqatal* construction after an *infinitive construct* functions in ways similar to those we have observed in connection with other leading verbs. The line between an apodosis and a consequent situation is often fuzzy in the construction. The examples can be taken as conditional sentences.” In addition to citing Exod 32:34 as an example of this type of clause, GKC cites Gen 3:5, Gen 44:31, Judges 16:2, Josh 6:10, 1 Sam 1:22, 1 Sam 16:23, 2 Sam 15:5, 1 Sam 20:18, 2 Sam 14:26, 2 Sam 15:10, Is 18:5, Exod 17:4, Is 10:25, Is 29:17, Is 37:26, Exod 16:6, Lev 7:16, 1 Kings 13:31, and Prov 24:27.

⁵² See, e.g., Murphy 1881, 214, who implies that implementing the scroll erasures is necessary, such that his angel must “exercise the prerogatives of the Most High.”

⁵³ Further reinforcing this interpretation is the use of the verb פָּקַד in Exod 32:35, a verb occasionally used to denote the act of counting people and presumably making lists (e.g., Exod 30:12–13; 38:25; Num 1:3, 19; 3:15, 39, 40, 42).

⁵⁴ Thus, it is incorrect to claim that “erasing names from the book extinguishes life” (Schniedewind 2004, 33). For similar readings, see Clements 1972, 209 (“Moses’ prayer pictures the names of all living people as recorded by God in a book. When they die their name is erased, so that the blotting-out of a name signifies death”); Baynes 2012, 35–36 (“This is a book of life . . . that has to do with the physical life of those written in it,” and “indicates life on earth as the people of God,” where erasure from it means “physical death”); Noegel 2010 who uses Exod 32:32–33 as an example of the “cosmologically power role of writing” (146); Stavrakopoulou 2021, 290–292; Paul 2007 (“The erasure of a sinner’s name from such a register is equivalent to death”); Bietenhard 1951, 232–233.

⁵⁵ On Yahweh as a judge administering a legal decision in Exod 32:34, see Gunnel 1980, who observes that “PQD is the judge’s activity of judging, the military commander’s activity of command and the religious leader’s activity of leading” (186). As such, the use of פִּקֵּד in this context points to Yahweh’s activity of judging; however, פִּקֵּד in Exod 32:34 should not

ple roles within his divine bureaucracy, one of which involves administrative writing.

Understanding Yahweh as performing (divine) administrative writing also sheds light on Yahweh's dissatisfaction with Israel performing censuses. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, performing a census appears dangerous. In Exod 30:11–16, for example, Moses must take a ransom for people's lives when taking a census to prevent a plague from coming upon them. Similarly, when David takes a census, Yahweh considers such an act a sin that engenders plague and punishment (2 Samuel 24). Scholars have even suggested that the extreme numbers from the census of Israel in Numbers 1 are not the result of editorial corruption but had more “to do with the ancient taboos about the whole process of enrolling names in a list.”⁵⁶ Moreover, Schniedewind suggests that the Levites in Numbers 1:47–51 are not included in the census because they serve the Tabernacle and make “offerings to ward off wrath against those being registered in the census.”⁵⁷ Scholars like William Schniedewind and Joachim Schaper frame these census lists and the negative results as reflecting “the numinous power of writing down names.”⁵⁸ On the basis of the previous discussion, though, perhaps such census-taking is less problematic due to the ostensibly numinous power of writing names⁵⁹ and

be translated as judgment or construed as Yahweh's act of punishing. In particular, when פִּקֹּדֶי (PQD) appears in contexts describing Yahweh's disfavor and judgment of his people (e.g., Exod 32:34; Jer 5:9; Hos 1:4; Amos 3:2; Zeph 1:8; Zech 10:3; Ps 89:33), Gunnel suggests a form with various steps, and within the form, Yahweh's act of PQD is distinct from the results or consequences of PQD. So, situating Yahweh as a judge administering legal decisions not only fleshes out Yahweh's character but also substantiates the notion that the grammatical structure in Exod 32:34 is about a future implementation of judgment, which occurs in Exod 32:35.

⁵⁶ Schniedewind 2004, 31.

⁵⁷ Schniedewind 2004, 31.

⁵⁸ Schniedewind 2004, 31. Schaper 2004, 113, suggests the numinous power of writing in relation to the oral-written interplay in Deuteronomy and Moses placing the tablets into the ark; however, this seems to have less to do with hiding the numinous written word of God and more to do with creating a sort of foundation deposit in the ark. Additionally, Schniedewind is not necessarily wrong that writing can have a numinous sense, as some examples demonstrate (Schniedewind 2004, 24–34); however, each instance of writing ought to be understood within its own context rather than assuming that writing names in general is numinous. Note as well that Schniedewind never clearly defines the term “numinous,” which is significant considering the weight that the term numinous holds on account of Rudolf Otto.

⁵⁹ One problem with understanding the 2 Samuel 24 census in relation to the danger of writing names is that 1) David is given an option of punishments (i.e., there is no clear cause and effect, as David could choose his punishment) and 2) nothing is mentioned regarding eliminating the names

more problematic because taking a census breaches Yahweh's divine administrative writing role.⁶⁰

Within the Hebrew Bible, a common divine function is to maintain lists of people for different administrative purposes.⁶¹ For example, in the discussion of how the people will grow to become the remnant of Israel (Isa 4:2), those who remain in Zion and Jerusalem are said to be "recorded for life in Jerusalem" (Isa 4:3; **הַכְּתוּב לַחַיִּים בִּירוּשָׁלַם**). Contextually, the implicit list, that is, the material object, within which individuals are recorded has no intrinsic power and is not a book of life.⁶² Instead, the list is the divine administrative document that enables Yahweh to implement changes to Jerusalem. That is, verse 1 describes the challenging socioeconomic situation, verse 2 articulates a link between people surviving in the land and Yahweh, verse 3a identifies that those remaining in Jerusalem and Zion are called holy, and verse 3b indicates that the remnant and those called holy are recorded for life in Jerusalem. In the narrative sequence of Is 4:1–3, the people are already the remnant of Israel in Jerusalem and Zion before being recorded for life in Jerusalem. Thus, the divine administrative list is not something that enables people to be part of the remnant but rather something that reflects their status as part of the remnant. The precise purpose of the divine administrative list ap-

of people who were written down.

⁶⁰ Although Schniedewind 2004 frames his discussion in terms of the numinous power of writing names, he begins to move toward this possibility in his discussion of 2 Sam 24: "the writing down of names in a list treads in the realm of the divine." Additionally, this idea does not need to be in tension with Numbers 1, where Israel records names. In Numbers 1, Yahweh initiates the administrative writing. As such, the act should not be understood as a breach of Yahweh's role but rather as an authorized extension of Yahweh's role. I am thankful to Abigail Emerson for bringing this point to my attention.

⁶¹ On lists as part of scribal education, see Schniedewind 2019, 70–94.

⁶² Cf., e.g., Roberts 2015, 68, who comments that "these survivors will be the righteous whose names were written in God's book of life (Exod 32:32) and therefore did not perish in God's refining judgment on Jerusalem"; Kaiser 1983 [1981], 86–87, commenting that "the prophet knows that only those whose names stand written in the heavenly book of life will escape [judgment]," with references to New Testament literature and second temple period literature as well as Zoroastrian and Greek texts; Paul 2007; and Bietenhard 1951, 232–233 ("Hier bedeutet offenbar der Ausdruck 'aus dem Buche tilgen' dasselbe wie 'töten'. Alle lebenden Menschen sind darnach in einem Buche Gottes verzeichnet; wird einer aus dem Verzeichnis gestrichen, dann stirbt er. Dieses Streichen kann Straf- und Gerichtsakt Gottes sein, wenn er einen vorzeitig 'aus dem Buche streicht', d. h. sterben lässt. Umgekehrt bedeutet dann 'am Leben bleiben': vor Gott als Gerechter gelten. Damit bekommt das Buch Gottes als Verzeichnis der lebenden Menschen eine Beziehung zur ethischen Beurteilung des Menschen durch Gott").

pears in verse 4: only after identifying the remnant and those individuals being recorded for life in Jerusalem can Yahweh take action in verses 4–5 to clean Jerusalem and reenter Mount Zion. So, similar to Exod 32:32–33, the divine administrative list has no numinous power but narratively functions as an administrative tool that enables Yahweh to implement changes and take action.⁶³

Lists function in a similar way in various other places within the Hebrew Bible. Three examples will suffice. First, in Jeremiah 17, being “inscribed in the earth” (בְּאֶרֶץ יִכְתְּבוּ) in verse 13 (likely meaning allotted for Sheol or the underworld)⁶⁴ marks the culmination and consequence of Judahites transgressing against Yahweh, and the speaker carefully excludes himself from that group recorded for the earth (vv. 14–18). Here, a divinely written list is the culmination of human action, and whereas the list in Is 4:3 served as a means by which Yahweh chooses his next course of action, the list in Jer 17:13 becomes a means by which the speaker characterizes himself socially. Second, Ezekiel 13 reflects the notion of a divine administrative list primarily as an administrative tool that enables Yahweh to implement changes and take action. Ezekiel 13:1–8 describes how prophets not ordained by Yahweh mislead Israel through false prophecy. Now in the Babylonian exile, their actions culminate in verse 9 in not being inscribed in the record of the house of Israel (וּבְכִתְּבֵי בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִכְתְּבוּ). Here, the divine administrative list is the result of human actions, not a predetermined list. Exclusion from the list indicates their inability to return to the land of Israel from the Babylonian exile (וְאֶל־אֶדְמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָבֹאוּ) in verse 9, an action that Yahweh is responsible for implementing and initiating. Third, more broadly, Yahweh creating a scroll or list as something to spur subsequent action appears elsewhere: in Mal 3:16, a scroll of remembrance is written before Yahweh (וַיִּכְתֹּב סֵפֶר זִכְרוֹן לְפָנָיו) for those revering Yahweh, and the content of the סֵפֶר זִכְרוֹן, the scroll of remembrance, appears key to the day that Yahweh is preparing wherein they (those who revere Yahweh) become his treasured possession (וְהָיוּ אִמֹּר יְהוָה צִבְאוֹת לַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי) and have success (עָשָׂה סִגְלָה) (vv. 17–21); in Psalm 87:6, Yahweh inscribes a register of people already born in Zion (יְהוָה יִסְפֹּר בְּכִתּוֹב עַמִּים זֶה יֶלֶד־שָׁם סִלָּה), an act of recording a real-life situation and not necessarily writing numinously; in Psalm 139:16, the content recorded in Yahweh’s scroll (וְעַל־סֵפֶרְךָ) relates to Yahweh recording the process of forming and fashioning the speaker (vv. 13–16), not an expression of belief that

⁶³ This is comparable to but distinct from the tablets of life in Mesopotamia: “The depictions of the [tablet of life] demonstrate that it keeps a record of human beings, their deeds, and their life span” (Barrabee 2012).

⁶⁴ On “in the earth” as “underworld,” see Lundbom 1999, 798.

“every one of his days has been written providentially in God’s book.”⁶⁵ In this sense, list-making appears to be how Yahweh conducts official business on the basis of written documents.

Such divine administrative duties align well with deities throughout the ancient Near East. In Mesopotamia, for instance, Bēlet-šēri appears as a divine administrator who maintains entry records into the netherworld. As Geller explains, “In the absence of Bēlet-šēri, august scribe of the Netherworld, no foot can enter Hades, nor any path negotiate the Netherworld.”⁶⁶ In Egypt, Thoth provides letters “to the deceased in order to enable him to pass by the doors of the Netherworld and to arrive at the Hall of Osiris.”⁶⁷ More generally, Thoth parallels Yahweh’s role as a writing administrator and judge.⁶⁸

Similarly, the Babylonian deity Nabû writes destinies as administrative records which subsequent deities must enforce, and Nabû’s writing is not a form of numinous power. In particular, kings request that Nabû, the god of scribes and writing,⁶⁹ write and ascribe to them a good, extended life in the tablets of destiny. For example, “(O Nabû) pronounce a long life for me, write down for me old age in your reliable tablet.”⁷⁰ As cited in the dictionary, Nabû’s act of writing the king’s name on the reliable tablet suggests that the tablet has a life-giving power. The subsequent line, though, shows that being written in the tablet is only the first step. The second step involves Nabû advocating for the speaker, the king, in front of Marduk: “Before Marduk, the king of the heavens and the earth, my

⁶⁵ Haag 1995, 381.

⁶⁶ Geller 2016, 143n41. See also, e.g., “By the life of Ningēštinanna, the exalted tablet scribe of the Netherworld” (trans. from Ebeling 1953, 388); George 2003, 851–852; and “Come in Belet-seri, bookkeeper of the great gods, beloved of Anu!” (Maul 2018, 29, translating Zimmern 1901, 96, no. 87:2–10).

⁶⁷ Van der Toorn, Becking, and Van Der Horst 1999, 862.

⁶⁸ REAMR, “Thoth.”

⁶⁹ Frayne and Stuckey 2021, 202–221, note that Nabû is iconographically represented holding “a wedge-shaped writing implement, his usual symbol, and sometimes a writing tablet”; and in Babylon, his temple was called “House of the Author of Heaven and Earth” on account of his role as the god of accounting. For additional discussion on how Nabû is depicted in archaeology and art, see Seidel 1998–2001, 24–27. See also George 2003, 851–852, for a translation of “The Death of Ur-Nammu and His Descent to the Netherworld” (from Kramer 1967, 119): “¹²² A headcover (with) the “lofty” ears of a wise man, (made of) alabaster, ¹²³ A tablet-reed split(?) at the side, the “hall-mark” of the scribe, ¹²⁴ A lapis-lazuli surveying-rod, a reed of one *ninda* . . ., ¹²⁵ To his spouse Ninazi[mua], ¹²⁶ The [noble] scri[be] of the Netherworld.”

⁷⁰ CAD 17, part 2, s.v. “*šaṭāru*,” 6b, c’. Available in Langdon 1912, 100 (VAB 4 100 ii:23–25): “Auf deiner zuverlässigen Tafel, die da festsetzt den Bezirk des Himmels und der Erde, befehl Länge meiner Tage, schreibe mir zu Nachkommenschaft.”

fatherly progenitor, let my deed be welcome, speak in my favor.”⁷¹ In another inscription, we read, “May Nabû, the scribe of the universe, decree on the tablet long days to come.”⁷² As with the previous example, the quotation in the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* seems to suggest that the act of writing somehow generates life for the king; however, the subsequent text illustrates that Nabû not only writes the speaker down for a long life but then implements that decree: “May he guard your life.”⁷³ The phrase here is *lišṣur napšatka*, a third-person masculine singular G precativ from *naṣāru* and the feminine noun *napištu*. In Akkadian, this phrase commonly refers to “the protection granted by gods.”⁷⁴ Yet again, writing is not efficacious for protecting a king’s life. Instead, writing is only the first step in Nabû implementing what is guaranteed or decreed through that writing. Finally, consider the following Neo-Assyrian text that involves Ninlil: “My good health has been written down in your presence, my life is entrusted to the lap of Ninlil.”⁷⁵ As with the previous examples, being written down for good health is the first step; the process culminates in Ninlil being responsible for the speaker. Thus, while Nabû’s divine administrative status in Mesopotamia is distinct from Yahweh in that he is part of a broader pantheon, he functions similarly to Yahweh in that his writing is not magical, life-giving, or numinous but is rather the administrative aspect preceding various deities taking action to protect the speaker.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Langdon 1912, 100 (Nebukadnezar Nr. 11, 26–28). Original German: “Vor Marduk, dem König Himmels und der Erden, meinem väterlichen Erzeuger, lass meine Taten willkommen sein, sprich zu meinen Gunsten.”

⁷² *CAD* 17, part 2, s.v. “*šaṭāru*,” 6b, c’.

⁷³ The original German: “möge dei[n] Leben behüten!” See Stummer 1927, 19–21.

⁷⁴ *CAD* 11, part 2, s.v. “*naṣāru*,” 7a.

⁷⁵ *CAD* 17, part 2, s.v. “*šaṭāru*,” 6b, c’. For details, see Streck 1916, 346–347.

⁷⁶ Another example is cited in *CAD* 17, part 2, s.v. “*šaṭāru*,” 6b, c’. The following translation is from Walker and Kramer 1982, 76: “May [Nabû, the scribe] of Esagila, who directs the regions (of the world) and provides abundantly for the shrines, shorten his days and write his life as <not> one day more” (lines 33’–34’). This text appears between a threat of Marduk stopping canals (line 40’) and turning favorable destinies evil (line 29’), giving the throne to an enemy (line 30’), and destroying people through hunger and famine (line 31’). Thus, for Nabû to “shorten his days and write his life as <not> one day more” is the implementation of a written record, not “the idea of the gods writing a man’s destiny,” as Walker and Kramer suggest. See also Lambert 1959–1960, 66, in which the text’s speaker says, “You inscribe favour” (*ta-šaṭ-ṭar dum-qu*). Like the examples discussed here, being inscribed for favor is but the first step in a series of more direct actions, such as bringing forth offspring (line 10) and using conjurations and incantations to give life (line 11). For details pointing to the administrative nature of destiny as mutable and the tablets of destiny as administrative, see

The comparison between Yahweh and gods like Nabû, Thoth, and Bēlet-šēri aims to highlight the continuity in terms of how deities in the ancient Near East maintained lists as writers. In this sense, Joachim Schaper is correct that Yahweh “bears no resemblance to gods like Thoth in Egypt or Nabu in Mesopotamia. Scribalism is not YHWH’s domain as such; he is not considered a patron of scribes.”⁷⁷ However, Yahweh can be depicted as a divine writer even if writing is not his domain and he is not a patron of scribes. In this case, divine writing illuminates Yahweh’s divine administrative activity, which is distinct from the broader ancient Levantine context wherein authoritative deities did not perform the work of active, artisan, and messenger deities.⁷⁸ Moreover, Yahweh’s divine administrative activity may have served as a socio-rhetorical myth to legitimize the priestly administrative scribes of ancient Israel and Judah.

Cumulatively, the preceding evidence indicates that Yahweh’s scroll in Exod 32 is best understood as an administrative document, not a book of life. Various evidence in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East support this interpretation: Yahweh’s action in Exod 32 after he says he will erase names; other biblical texts involving census taking and divine list-making; duties of divine administrative scribes in Mesopotamia and Egypt; and how Nabû’s lists and writing functioned in relation to implementing long life for people.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I first showed that analyzing Yahweh’s writing in the context of administrative writing is pertinent to understanding the socio-rhetorical mythmaking that scribes constructed in Exod 32:32–33. Second, I showed that Yahweh wrote the scroll and interacted with it materially. Finally, I

Lämmerhirt and Zgoll 2009–2011, which highlights how 1) one text situates the tablet of destiny in the administrative center of Assur and 2) the tablets did not inherently grant protection or power (153). Moreover, the rhetoric of cursing or diminishing life as a consequence of effacing a name on an inscription supports the notion that the effacing itself is not efficacious; rather, the deity must implement and respond to the change in the written text. In the Kilamuwa inscription, effacing and destroying the inscription requires that Baal-Semed, Baal-Hammon, and Rakkab-El destroy the head of the person who effaced the inscription (Bekins 2020, 63). Similarly, in the Azatiwada inscription, should an individual efface the inscription, Baal-Shamem, El, the Sun, and the sons of gods are called upon to “erase that kingdom and that king and that man who is a man of renown” (Bekins 2020, 78).

⁷⁷ Schaper 2004, 110, is talking about Deuteronomy, but the observation is applicable more generally.

⁷⁸ Handy 1994.

demonstrated how Yahweh is a divine writer who performs, among other duties, administrative writing duties.⁷⁹

At a high level, my central arguments have broader methodological implications. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh writes; however, as this article demonstrates, each type of writing must be historicized for a precise, accurate understanding of the texts at hand.⁸⁰ Each context is distinct and reflects ideas and types of writing in connection to different crafts, such as the extent to which documents were ephemeral.⁸¹ This observation aligns with Alice Mandell's proposed craft-literacy approach to writing in the ancient Levant.⁸² Although Mandell focuses on inscriptions, extending Mandell's approach to include objects within narratives enables scholars to historicize and understand a socio-rhetorical myth that likely shaped how

⁷⁹ This article did not engage with either 1) the oral-written scholarly discourse surrounding the Hebrew Bible or 2) other texts with socio-rhetorical mythmaking and craft-literacies and how literarily-represented craft-literacies change and how Yahweh is represented within those narratives. E.g., in Pseudo-Philo, the depiction of Yahweh seemingly makes an effort to present a less corporeal version of Yahweh while still using the same notion of effacing texts: "And I will command a cloud, and it will go and take dew and send it down upon the books and blot out what is written in them. And afterward, I will send forth my lightning, and it will burn up those books" (trans. D. J. Harrington, *OTP* 2:337). Whereas Exodus appears comfortable portraying Yahweh as engaging with written books at a material level, Pseudo-Philo displays a shift away from Yahweh's corporeality and toward a more incorporeal, distanced deity.

⁸⁰ E.g., the tablets of stone in Exodus (Exod 24:12; 31:18; 32:15–16; 34:1, 4), the tablets of stone in Deuteronomy (Deut 9:10; 10:2, 4), human hearts (Jer 31:33), and writing on a wall (Daniel 5:5).

⁸¹ At a high level, Seth Sanders is correct that whereas the technology and materiality of Babylonian writing culture enabled "its scholars to read texts across radical gaps in time and space by writers forty generations dead who spoke mutually unintelligible languages," Judean scribal culture was "dominated by an ideology of reinvention" because of the perishable, ephemeral nature of papyrus and parchment (Sanders 2019, 176). However, rather than understanding Judean scribal culture as a monolith, different craft-literacies within Judean society had different ideas of a document's ephemerality and significance, and such views changed based on the type of document, akin to how the narrator's representation of Yahweh's scroll in Exod 32 is distinct from the narrator's representation of the stone tablets.

⁸² A craft-literacy approach "adapts a material cultural perspective on the study of literacies connected to contexts of craft-production in order to nuance the study of a broad range of people involved in text-making using the Levantine alphabetic script. Looking at inscriptions as crafted material things offers a path forward to better evaluate the technical and technological processes represented in the inscriptional record. Such an approach better situates ancient texts in their different contexts of display, use, and interaction as it shifts our gaze from viewing inscriptions as reified scribal objects to appreciating how they engaged diverse ancient people through a host of sensory and embodied experiences" (Mandell 2023, 172).

some craft specialists perceived and represented themselves. In that sense, this article follows a recent trend linking the fictive texts with the “real” texts in classical studies.⁸³ Like in classical studies, biblical scholars have often ignored or minimized how documentary genres are incorporated and manipulated within fictive, literary contexts. As this article demonstrates, a proper interface between the so-called real documents and the fictive documents is pertinent.

⁸³ In their volume on documentality in the Roman Empire, Jacqueline Arthur-Montagne, Scott J. DiGiulio, and Inger N. I. Kuin observe how classicists engage with documentary genres: “The past two decades have also witnessed new research on the role of documents within classical literature. From epistolary fictions to pseudo-documentarism, scholars have become increasingly interested in how classical authors incorporated and manipulated documentary genres within their works. To a large extent, however, these fields of study have operated in isolation from one another: those investigating fictitious documents often do so in strictly literary terms, while those who work on ‘real’ documents rarely engage with imaginary versions. Accordingly, scholarly expertise is concentrated at opposite ends of what was, in the Roman world, an interconnected system of documentary communication and production” (Arthur-Montagne, DiGiulio, and Kuin 2022, 1–2).

ABBREVIATIONS

- OED Oxford English Dictionary. www.oed.com.
 REAMR *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Ancient Mediterranean Religions*. Edited by Eric Orlin, Lisbeth S. Fried, Jennifer Wright Knust, Michael L. Satlow, and Michael E. Pregil. London: Routledge, 2016.
 TAD *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Egypt*. By Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986–1999.
 ThWAT *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970–1999.

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