

Deuteronomy 6: 4–9 and 11: 13–21 as Self-Referential Commandments

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Two Passages

Two passages of the Torah, Deut. 6: 4–9 and 11: 13–21, are quoted on the parchment sheet that is inside every tefillin box and inside every mezuzah. Each of these passages is what mathematicians call self-referencing or recursive [1,2]. This paper explains this instance of self-referencing in non-mathematical terms. The two passages have similar structures and nearly identical self-referencing.

The two passages, using the JPS 1917 translation [3], are:

4 Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

6 And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart;

7 and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

8 And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes.

9 And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates. {S}

and

13 And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul,

14 that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil.

15 And I will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle, and thou shalt eat and be satisfied.

16 Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them;

17 and the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain, and the ground shall not yield her fruit; and ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you.

18 Therefore shall ye lay up these My words in your heart and in your soul; and ye shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.

19 And ye shall teach them your children, talking of them, when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

20 And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates;

21 that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, upon the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers to give them, as the days of the heavens above the earth. {S}

For the purposes of the analysis in this paper, this fairly literal translation is accurate enough that it is not necessary to examine the Hebrew.

The available commentary about the two passages, seems to be all over the map as to the referents of “these words (haDvarim haEileh)” in Verse 6:6 and of “these My words (Dvarai Eileh)” in Verse 11:18. Some examples this author has seen include

- the Shema and
- the whole Torah.

Few of the commentaries on the passages even specifically identify the referents, although, most do observe that these passages are what are written on the parchments inside the tefillin boxes and mezuzot. See the discussion in the section titled “Commentaries”.

Self-Referentiality

Careful analyses of the passages’ structure coupled with the confirmation offered by the contents of the tefillin boxes and the mezuzah makes the referent in each passage clear. See Figures 1 and 2. The words referred to by “these words” in Verse 6:6 are the text that contains Verse 6:6. Where does this text begin and where does it end? The text should go no further back than Verse 6:4 because Verses 6:1–3 serve as a general introduction to an upcoming list of statutes and commandments and explaining that the Children of Israel (Israel) would increase mightily in their promised land if they obey the statutes and commands. The text should go no further than Verse 6:9 because Verse 10 switches subjects to talk about how the land is that which God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Likewise, the words referred to by “these My words” in Verse 11:18 are the text that contains Verse 18. That text should go no further back than Verse 11:13 because Verses 11:10–12 talk about why Israel should care for the land that they will soon possess. That text should go no further than Verse 11:21 because Verse 11:22 begins a discussion of the good that will happen to Israel if they obey God’s commandments.

Each passage amounts to a self-referential commandment, i.e., a recursively defined commandment, to Israel. For example, the entirety of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 is one commandment *C* that commands Israel to

1. first observe that the Lord their God is one
2. and then to do several things with *C* itself:
 - a. take *C* to heart,
 - b. teach *C* to one’s children,
 - c. talk of *C* while going about the activities of life,
 - d. put copies of *C* inside the boxes of the arm and head tefillin, and
 - e. put a copy of *C* inside the mezuzah.

The blue text means that a copy of the text in the red rectangle is put in each box of the hand and head tefillins.

The green text means that a copy of the text in the red rectangle is put inside each mezuzah on the post of any door or gate.

4 Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

6 And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart;

7 and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

8 And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes.

9 And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates. {S}

Figure 1

13 And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul,

14 that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil.

15 And I will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle, and thou shalt eat and be satisfied.

16 Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them;

17 and the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain, and the ground shall not yield her fruit; and ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you.

18 Therefore shall ye lay up **these My words** in your heart and in your soul; and ye shall **bind them for a sign upon your hand,** and **they** shall be **for frontlets between your eyes.**

19 And ye shall teach **them** your children, talking of **them**, when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

20 And thou shalt **write them upon the door-posts of thy house,** and **upon thy gates;**

21 that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, upon the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers to give them, as the days of the heavens above the earth. {S}

Figure 2

The entirety of Deuteronomy 11:13–21 is one commandment *D* that commands Israel to

1. first serve the Lord their God full heartedly,
 - a. in exchange for which, God will provide for their successful agriculture
2. then watch themselves that they do not turn to serve other gods,
 - a. in exchange for which, God will be angry and will stop the rains so that their agriculture will fail,
3. and then to do several things with *D* itself:
 - a. take *D* to heart,
 - b. teach *D* to one's children,
 - c. talk of *D* while going about the activities of life,
 - d. put copies of *D* inside the boxes of the arm and head tefillin,
 - e. put a copy of *D* inside the mezuzah,
4. in exchange for which, God will extend their and their children's lives.

Indeed, we see copies of both of these passages in the tefillin boxes and in the mezuzot.

These two passages are very unusual as commandments. Most commandments talk about *things*, e.g., foods that can be eaten, foods that cannot be eaten, parts of the ark to be built, and clothing to be worn, or *behaviors*, e.g., how to treat children, spouses, and strangers, to keep the sabbath, and to not murder. These two passages seem to be the only commandments that talk about themselves, and are thus self-referential.

Commentaries

Friedman [4] gives no commentaries on Verse 6:6, the sentence containing “haDvarim haEileh”. His commentary on Verse 6:8 begins with “**bind them on your hand**. This came to be taken literally, requiring one to wear boxes (tefillin) on one's arm and head containing passages from the Torah.” with no details given about which passage from the Torah or their relation to these very verses being commented on. Nothing further is offered about the text in the boxes in connection with any of Verses 6:9, 11:18, and 11:20.

The Hertz Chumash's [5] commentary on Verses 6:4–9 says of the Israelite “His is bidden to love God with heart, soul, and might; to remember all the commandments and instruct his children therein; to recite the words of God when retiring or rising; to bind those words on the arm and the head, and to inscribe them on his door-posts and the city gates.” This seems to be saying that “these words” are the Shema. This impression is confirmed when the comments on Verse 6 itself says “*these words*. In v. 4 and 5; viz. the Unity of God and the duty of undivided allegiance to Him, as the epitome of the teaching of the Book.”

Plaut's commentary [6] on the Torah translates the phrase “haDvarim haEileh” as “these instructions” and gives no specific commentary on Verse 6, which contains the phrase, while giving a commentary on all Verses 6:1–6 and 6:7–13. Its commentary on Verse 8 is “*Sign on your hand*. Originally this was a figure of speech, but Jewish tradition interpreted it to command the wearing of hand-phylacteries (*tefillin shel yad*) *Symbol on your forehead* ... understood literally as the command to wear head-phylacteries (*tefillin shel rosh*) The two sets of tefillin

consist of small boxes The boxes contain parchments with the *Shema* and other scriptural selections inscribed on them.” with *absolutely no mention* of the fact that these other scriptural selections are the selfsame verses that the commentary is about. Therefore, it is a total surprise that the commentary on Verses 11: 13–21 is “These verses are the fourth selection inscribed on phylacteries because mention is made of binding these admonitions to hand and forehead (vers 18). The passage is also recited in the traditional daily liturgy as the second Section of the *Shema*, after Deut. 6:4–9.”

The older commentary by Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and the Ramban and in the Mishna discuss the meaning of “totafot”, kashrut of the copy of the passages in a mezuzah, the good effects of laying tefillins and attaching a mezuzah, and that these commandments are for all places and not just in the Land of Israel [7]. There is no discussion of self-referentiality.

Other Self-Referencing in the Torah

Throughout Deut., there are instances of “haTorah hazot” or “sefer haTorah hazeh”, especially in the context of writing or reading, that refer to the very Torah that contains these verses: Deut. 1:5, 4:8, 17:18, 17:19, 27:3, 27:8, 27:26, 28:58, 28:61, 29:20, 29:28, 30:10, 31:9, 31:11, 31:12, 31:24, 31:26, and 32:46. For example, in Deut. 17:18, we see

v'katav lo et-mishneh haTorah hazot, al sefer
and he wrote to him the mishnah of this Torah in a book

Even Deut. 4:43, which has only “haTorah”, is a major part of the familiar verse that is said when holding up the Torah scroll that has just been read:

v'zot haTorah asher sam Moshe lifnei b'nei Yisrael
and this is the Torah that Moses put before the children of Israel.

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End Notes and References

1 D. R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1980).

2 C. Burch, “What is recursion?”, Department of Computer Science, Carnegie Mellon University (<<https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~cburch/survey/recurse/recursion.html>>, 2000) viewed January 2022.

3 *A Hebrew - English Bible According to the Masoretic Text and the JPS 1917 Edition* (<<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0.htm>>, 2016) viewed January 2022.

4 R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2001).

5 J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text English Translation and Commentary* (Brooklyn, NY: Soncino, 1960).

6 W. G. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).

7 “Sefaria: a Living Library of Jewish Texts Online” <<https://www.sefaria.org/texts>> viewed January 2022.