

## DAY OF EXEGETICAL REFLECTION

Spencer and Clara Werner Auditorium

Wyneken Hall

Concordia Seminary

St. Louis, MO

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2011

“The Bible in English: Its Present and Future”

8:00 a.m.                      Registration/check-in  
Wyneken Hall Foyer (Refreshments in Wyneken 101)

9:00 a.m.                      Welcome/Introductions

9:10 a.m.                      Translation and Oral Performance  
David Trobisch, American Bible Society

10:00 a.m.                      Break

## **(PPT) How did Early Christians read the Bible?**

- **Performance:** Job 1; 2:1-10.

**(PPT)** At the end of the first letter to the Thessalonians (1Thess 5:26-28) Paul salutes the recipients with the words, “Greet all brothers with a holy kiss,” and he ends the letter with his usual wish, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” But between the greetings and the wish of grace he adds, “I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all brothers.”<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

In the following I want to direct our attention to (1) what the oldest handwritten copies of the New Testament look like, and (2) what it meant for the first “readers” to read them. I would like to make the point, that reading literature in antiquity was a “performance”. The text was considered a way to code sound bites, comparable to our sheet music, a script that needed to be interpreted by a performer for an audience.

If we as Bible translators are interested in producing a functional equivalent in our modern translations, we have to have a sense of how these texts functioned when they were first designed by their authors and editors, and how they were experienced by their first audiences.

### *Manuscripts*

When Paul asked a congregation to read his letter to everyone, what kind of script did he provide? What did the manuscript look like? What did early Christians use when they read texts during their worship services? Although we do not have the original letter Paul sent, we do know what texts written to be read to an audience

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<sup>1</sup> Ἐνορκίζω ὑμᾶς τὸν κύριον ἀναγνωσθῆναι τὴν ἐπιστολὴν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς.

looked like. About 5,600 handwritten copies containing New Testament texts have survived to this day.

### *Structural Markers*

(PPT) The oldest manuscripts of the New Testament provide the text in an unstructured format. Commas, periods, colons, question marks, and quotation marks are curiously absent. No paragraph breaks the flow; no spaces separate the words. The text body looks like a single, long word. Chapter numbers are not part of the manuscript tradition in antiquity, and when they were added to medieval manuscripts, they varied from manuscript to manuscript.<sup>2</sup>

In antiquity, performers of such texts had to make some of the same decisions that translators into modern languages have to make as they prepare their text for publication; they had to break up the flow of letters, the so-called *scriptio continua*, into words, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. They had to discern titles, editorial additions, summaries, and other structural signals included in the body of text. They had to use their best judgment to identify unmarked notes and comments added by earlier editors.

### *Nomina Sacra*

(PPT) In addition to having to structure the continuous flow of letters, performers of the Greek New Testament were confronted with the so-called *nomina sacra*, a system of contractions that had to be interpreted during the oral performance.

(PPT) These words were marked with a line over the letters, and only the first one or two characters and the last one or two characters of the word are written out. Instead

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<sup>2</sup> David Trobisch, “Structural Markers in New Testament Manuscripts with Special Attention to Observations in Codex Boernerianus (G 012) and Papyrus 46 of the Letters of Paul”, *Pericope: Scripture as Written and Read in Antiquity*, vol. 5: Layout Markers in Biblical Manuscripts and Ugaritic Tablets, Marjo C.A. Korpel, Josef M. Oesch (ed.) (Assen: Koninklijke van Gorcum, 2005) 177-190.

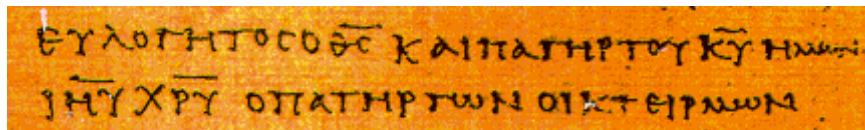
of writing ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, for example, only the first and the last letter is noted, ΙΣ.

(PPT 4x)

The words *Christ*, *Lord*, *God*, and *Jesus* are almost always marked in this way; other words like *father* (reflecting that this could be a reference to God), *son* (reflecting “son of God” as a reference to Christ), *Jerusalem* (the celestial city), *heaven* (where God resides), and as much as thirty other words are noted often but not always as *nomina sacra*.<sup>3</sup>

This system is unparalleled in non-Christian literature of the period. The origins are obscure, and the phenomenon continues to pose unanswered questions to the scholarly community. Nevertheless, it is clear that performers were expected to decode the contractions as they read aloud to an audience.

(PPT) In our example, the beginning of 2Cor 1:3 in the oldest witness for this passage—the Chester Beatty Papyrus P46 (ca. 200 CE)—is written as:<sup>4</sup> (PPT)



(PPT) ΕΥΛΟΓΗΤΟΣ ΘΘΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΑΤΗΡ ΤΟΥ ΚΥ ΗΜΩΝ

ΙΗΥΧΡΥ Ο ΠΑΤΗΡ ΤΩΝ ΟΙΚΤΙΡΜΩΝ

Before someone can read the passage fluently, spaces, breathing marks, and punctuation have to be added, and the *nomina sacra* have to be decoded:

(PPT) Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν

Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ πατὴρ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν

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<sup>3</sup> A.H.R.E Paap, *Nomina Sacra in the Greek Papyri of the First Five Centuries A.D.* (Leiden: Brill, 1959). Cf. David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 11-13. Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> F.G. Kenyon (ed.), *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri: Descriptions and Texts of Twelve Manuscripts on Papyrus of the Greek Bible*, Fasciculus III supplement: Pauline Epistles, London 1936-7.

To imagine the challenges a performer faced, try reading the following English text out loud. Like the oldest copies of the New Testament, it is written in capital letters with spaces and punctuation removed and typical *nomina sacra* contracted:

(PPT)

PAULASERVANTOFJSCHTCALLEDTOBEANAPOSTLESETAPARTFO  
RTHEGOSPELOFGDWHICHHEPROMISEDBEFOREHANDTHROUG  
HHISPROPHETSINTHEHOLYSCRIPTURESTHEGOSPELCONCERNI  
NGHISNWHOWASDESCENDEDFROMDDACCORDINGTOTHEFLE  
SH

Breaking up the continuous flow of letters into words requires an interpretative decision. The sequence “PAULASERVANTOFJSCHT” can be read as “Paula, servant of Jesus Christ” or as “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ,”—the context will decide.

Although it is not too difficult to understand the text at first reading, it is almost impossible to read an unfamiliar text aloud in a way that an audience could follow.

Today we perceive printed text as visual information—dark spots on a light background—to be decoded quietly. In antiquity, however, literature was designed by its authors to be read out loud. Just like sheet music today, ancient manuscripts were seen as a medium that preserved sound and required a performer to study it before it could be presented in a meaningful way.

The following examples from modern translations demonstrate how modern editors struggle with some of the same challenges a performer of literature in antiquity would have faced.

### *Editorial Asides*

(PPT) In John 1:38-39 a short dialogue between Jesus and his disciples is interrupted by an editorial comment:

*When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see."*

(NRSV John 1:38-39)

The narrator steps out of the story and, addressing his Greek speaking audience directly, explains that the word *Rabbi* is best translated into Greek as "teacher".

How would a public reader make clear to the congregation that this portion of text is an aside, since the hearers do not have the visual cues of parentheses?

A skilled performer, for example, might turn slightly and face the audience directly as he delivers the explanation, then return to his original posture to continue the dialogue in the narrative world of the story.

The Gospel According to John is full of such asides. The editors of the NRSV chose to put them between parentheses.

**Media** 1 Cor 7:1

*Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman."*

*The Illiterate Reader*

**(PPT)** An interesting document dated February 5, 304 CE, describes a certain Aurelius Ammonius, the lector of a Christian congregation (ἀναγνώστης ἐκ<κ>λησίας), sending an official letter to the authorities. He declares that the church owned no property except a few bronze objects.<sup>5</sup> Although the lector is obviously the person who performed the scriptures during the worship services, he

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<sup>5</sup> P. Oxy. XXXIII 2673.

has to hire a scribe, a certain Aurelius Serenus, to write the letter. The lector was illiterate.<sup>6</sup>

(PPT)

At first, an illiterate or blind reader sounds perplexing. However, once it is made clear that ancient manuscripts could only be read after intensive preparation, which almost certainly included an effort to memorize the manuscript, the notion makes sense. A good memory becomes more important than literacy or even eyesight. Just as people who are blind sometimes aspire to be great musicians, a person who cannot read can still be an excellent performer.

Quintilian, the famous Roman teacher of rhetoric and contemporary of Paul discourages to perform from a manuscript. He required students to memorize classic speeches “and declaim them standing in the manner which actual pleading require: thus he will simultaneously train delivery, voice and memory.”<sup>7</sup> Holding a manuscript would not allow the performer to imitate the body language of the public speaker.

Another glimpse into the life of the early Church is provided in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy. Timothy is prepared for his leadership role in Ephesus by reminding him of three qualities of a good pastor, (PPT) “Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading (ἀνάγνωσις), to exhorting, to teaching (1 Timothy 4:13).” It is not teaching or counseling, but rather the quality of the performance of literature which is mentioned first.

These remarks indicate that in antiquity reading a New Testament manuscript to an audience required preparation. At a minimum, the *scriptio continua* had to be

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<sup>6</sup> The expression in the autographic subscription is: μὴ εἰ(δότος) γρά(μματα). For a critical discussion: G.W. Clarke, “An Illiterate Lector,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 57(1984), 106-122.

<sup>7</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 1.11.14. Translated by H.E. Butler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920. Reprint 1996; LCL 124) 189.

structured and the *nomina sacra* had to be decoded before a text could be performed. It is also clear that excellent performances of literature were done from memory.

### *Early Christian Sanctuaries*

At the time when the New Testament writings originated, Christians met in private homes or—like other Hellenistic cult groups—rented rooms in restaurants for their meetings. First Corinthians documents that the meetings of the “Church of God in Corinth” (1Cor 1:2) were organized around a full meal (1Cor 11:21).

Archeological evidence can give us an idea how large these dining rooms were.<sup>8</sup> This opens a window for us to see what Paul and the other authors of the New Testament envisioned when they designed their writings to be performed before an audience.

(PPT) The images and descriptions of shared meals and symposia of the time presuppose that the participants lay down to eat.<sup>9</sup> One would lie on a couch (κλίνη or *lectus*) with the head resting on the left arm and a cushion in the back. This way the right arm was free to take the food.<sup>10</sup> The dining room is called *triclinium*, deriving its name from the three couches. On each couch there would normally be room for three or four people to lie next to each other, but the size varied. If the dining party was larger, several groups of three couches could be arranged in a larger dining room. It has been pointed out that a party of 12 companions, i.e. the presider and 12 members of a symposium, was remarkably common [Jesus]. The size of a *triclinium* typically

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<sup>8</sup> The discussion was started by the extensive study of public meals by Matthias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern*, Tübingen: Francke, 1996. Cf. also Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist. The Banquet in the Early Christian World*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002. Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal. Social Experimentation & Early Christian Identity*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Klinghardt, 75.

<sup>10</sup> Klinghardt, 78.



accommodated from 7 to 15 people.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, if the size of the group exceeded the size of the dining room, the group was divided and a new group congregated in another home or another location. The greeting list in Rom 16 mentions more than 30 persons, and five times a Christian household is mentioned (Rom 16:5.10.11.14.15).

Sources further indicate that it was the privilege of men to lie on the couches during the meals. For women and children it was appropriate to sit either on the couch of the husband or father or on low chairs (*subsellium*) placed before the host.

Lying down to eat, which in earlier times was the privilege of the nobility, was still a social marker in New Testament times. Sueton, for example, relates an anecdote in which the freed slave and comedy writer Terence (Publius Terentius Afer) first sits on one of the low chairs, but after he impressed the host Caecilius through his performance, he was asked to move up and take his place with the host:<sup>12</sup> (PPT)

Having been introduced while Caecilius was at supper, and being meanly dressed, he [Terence] is reported to have read the beginning of the play seated on a low stool near the great man's couch. But after reciting a few verses, he was invited to take his place at table, and, having supped with his host, went through the rest to his great delight.<sup>13</sup>

Suetonius, *De Poetis: Vita Terenti* 2

“Being meanly dressed” seems to be the social marker requiring the freed slave Terence to sit on the little chair instead of dining on a couch.

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<sup>11</sup> Klinghardt, 77-78.

<sup>12</sup> Klinghardt, 76.

<sup>13</sup> Suetonius, *The Life of Terence*, translated by Alexander Thomson and Thomas Forester (London, G. Bell and sons, 1881).

(PPT) The Letter of James reflects on the status of church members and their place at the dining table during the worship services. Again, the clothes of the individual are referenced:

For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

James 2:2-4 (NRSV)

According to the Letter of James, poor people and slaves were expected to stand or sit.<sup>14</sup> This implies that lying down was the privilege of the rich and the free.

### *Interpreting through Performance*

When a biblical passage—a story, a psalm, or an exhortation—is performed paperless, from memory, the performer will typically express only one of the many possible ways to understand a text. The intonation, gestures, movements will provide a subtext that interprets the script and often speaks louder than the exact wording of the translation. Just like preachers have to choose from the possible meanings of a passage the one reading they want to convey to their audience on that particular day, performers will have to do the same.

### *Narrative Midrash*

The Bible often tells a story more than once. It starts with two creation stories, it offers four gospels instead of one. Acts and the letters of Paul report the same events in different ways. In Jesus' time, when the Hebrew text was read, someone was expected to translate it ad hoc into Aramaic, the language of the listeners. Through

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<sup>14</sup> Σὺ στῆθι ἢ κάθου ἐκεῖ ὑπὸ τὸ ὑποπόδιον μου.

the discoveries among the Dead Sea Scrolls we are aware that the translators took liberties, and that they were expected to interpret the text for the situation of their readers as they translated. It is out of this practice that our sermons have grown.

Sometimes stories are best preached by re-telling them in a contemporary setting.

### *Example*

Let me give you an example.

A STORY! A STORY! – Let it come let it go!

“One day Jesus came again...”

...

End of the story. Amen.

### *Summary*

The earliest manuscripts of the Christian Bible, the archeological evidence of the *triclinia*, and the literary evidence in the New Testament suggest that a typical performance of a letter of Paul and, later, of other Christian literature would be heard by a group consisting of between seven and fifteen members. They would meet for a full meal in the evening, and after the meal sacred texts would be performed as part of the worship service.

Today we are facing a different situation. Our congregations are bigger than the early house churches, the full meal is reduced to the ritual celebration of the “Lord’s Supper” with a piece of bread and a sip of wine or grape juice, we meet on Sunday mornings instead of Sunday evenings, and the performance of the sacred text is often reduced to the reading of the lectionary selection from a printed book.

For many years now, together with friends and colleagues, I have encouraged congregational leaders to revive the Early Church practice of performing Biblical texts from memory instead of reading them from a printed Bible. I have worked with

congregations and taught the approach in the classroom, helped lectionary groups prepare for the Sunday reading, and taught three credit courses that focused on the memorization and performance of a letter of Paul or a prophet or a gospel. The experience has been overwhelmingly positive.

The goal of translating a text from one language into another is to put express it in a way the intended audience will understand. Performance can do that.

When Bible texts are performed, they are heard with fresh ears by the audience and also by the performer. Over and over have I witnessed the moment when a familiar Biblical text becomes meaningful through performance—or to say it in Biblical language—the moment, when the Word of God becomes flesh in our human existence.