

NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS IN THE CONTEXT OF READING PRACTICES OF THE ROMAN PERIOD: THE ROLE OF MEMORY AND PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Study of New Testament documents is often subject to the inappropriate assumption that “reading” entails disembodied decoding of inherent meanings. Reading is a complex activity which is part of a cultural system, to be understood within pertinent technological parameters. Memory was heavily emphasised in communication practices of the Roman Period, and a cultural-historical understanding of texts from that period should relate to such features.

Keywords: Roman Literacy, History of Reading, Early Christian Documents, Manuscripts, Manuscript Tradition, Memory, Transmission of Jesus Traditions

Introduction

It is a familiar scene, often introduced by clear signals that privacy and silence are now required. One pulls the chair up to the desk and arranges some of the books and other papers already lying there. Then, glasses are picked up from a preferred place, cleaned with a tissue or the hem of the blouse or some piece of cloth, perched on the nose and steadied behind the ears to gaze at the now lucid pages. Adjustment of the study-lamp and little shifts of the chair and arms to reduce the shadows on the book follow. One reaches for pencil or highlighter, and the soft sounds of scratching in the margins of book or notebook become audible. So, seated at a desk, surrounded by a distinct pool of light, enveloped by silence or soft, gentle music punctuated by the pushing up or sliding down of the glasses, every once in a while lifting them off and rubbing the skin between the eyebrows, screwing the eyelids shut to soothe tired eye muscles: We all recognise the activity of “reading.” These are the things we do when we read.

It is bewildering to imagine reading activities during the many centuries preceding our times. Silent studying is a rather recent phenomenon, as is our conception of working privately. In the Roman world, in that crowded daily life, people were never alone, sharing even their most intimate moments with servants, slaves, family, and friends. In the Greco-Roman world one would find an *auditorium* in the house of an educated man, and never a study. Obviously, until to just a little more than a hundred years ago, no-one could switch on a study lamp.

Imagine: Before the invention of glasses, before the thirteenth century, readers squinting their way through nebulous outlines of a text. After all, a quarter of all humankind is myopic. In addition there are almost three hundred *other* conditions of impaired eyesight from which we may suffer.

Even more bewildering is to imagine the long line of students before us who did not make use of desks. The desk, so characteristic of our trade, came into use with the development of the printing press. Imagine, if you can, research without underlining sentences and words...

In antiquity, writing was mostly done while sitting cross-legged – writing “on the knee” was the Greek phrase – and reading was often done standing.

Clearly, reading has a history.¹

This article has a very modest aim. I explore *some* aspects of reading practices in the first-century Roman world in order to suggest points for an agenda for researching New Testament documents informed by an ethnography of ancient communication.

Reading and Memory in Antiquity

Reading is an activity that we share with our ancestors, yet it is also something that can never be the same as what they experienced. “To put it more generally: What we count as “reading” must inevitably be relative to particular cultural purposes, and depend on the contrasting modes of oral rendition which a particular culture may have institutionalized” (Harris 1986, 153-154). It is an illusionary pretence that we can step outside of time in order to make contact with authors who lived centuries ago. Even if their texts have come down to us unchanged – which they have not – our relation to those texts cannot be the same as that of readers in the past *because* reading has a history.

It is self-evident that concepts of reading and memory play formative roles in New Testament scholarship. By and large, these concepts are construed as corresponding to contemporary ideas. It is to that illusion of continuity I want to draw attention – the notion that New Testament scholarship can be practised as *if there is no history of reading*. The conventional portrayal of those authors and readers is not a historical portrayal.

We must remind ourselves that the connection between education and literacy, which seems so natural to us, is simply a cultural convention of our own times. In Greco-Roman societies one could be educated without having the abilities to read or write. In fact, being literate (proficient with texts) was not even necessarily connected to writing and reading oneself. Concepts such as *illiterate*, or *literacy* are very much culture specific, historically determined (Street 1984, 8-11).

It is nevertheless that they [Greek and Roman elites] retained a strong element of orality in their lives ... they relied on the spoken word for purposes which in some other cultures have been served by the written word. They frequently dictated letters instead of writing them for themselves; they listened to political news rather than reading it; they attended recitations and performances, or heard slaves reading without having to read literary texts for themselves; and so on (Harris 1989, 36).

Ancient Reading

Reading in antiquity was not experienced as a silent scanning, mainly mental activity. It was a performative, vocal, oral-aural event.² The reader literally recited, with vocal and bodily gestures, the text which one usually memorised beforehand.

¹ For the preceding paragraphs see Rosen (1956); Trevor-Roper (1988); Schottenloher (1989); Burke (1991); Darnton (1991); Martin (1988); Small (1997); Fischer (2003, 11-43, 205-252).

² Useful overviews of evidence: Achtemeier (1990); Botha (1993); Fischer (2003, 45-97); Manguel (1996, 42-56); Marrou (1984, 196); McGuire (1960, 150); Saenger (1982, 370-373). Not only did limited literacy exist in antiquity (Botha 1992; Carney 1975, 110; Harris 1983, 1989; Lewis 1983, 82; Youtie 1971a, 1971b, 1975a, 1975b), but even the literate facets of the culture must be understood within the context of first-century communication realities and historical-cultural continua.

In antiquity reading was a physically demanding activity. Comfortable reading is something *we* are familiar with, and we need to visualise the very different way in which those people used their bodies when communicating by means of writing. There was a far more physical element in reading, and no one drew a clear distinction between the physical internalisation and acquisition of knowledge. That is, when we consider the well-known fact that reading was done vocally as a *datum* to be interpreted, we realise that reading and memorising were integrally connected. This brief article is an exploration of some evidence from antiquity to show just such aspects of the cultural embodiments of reading in antiquity.

In a cultural-anthropological sense, ancient reading practices indicate a whole range of cognitive and social effects and values particular to an orally based communication technology.³ It might seem superfluous to emphasise these matters – especially in view of the technological changes separating our societies from theirs – but impreciseness and neglect of historical realities permeate discussions of the use of writing in antiquity.

Silent Reading?

Reading, as is well known, was done aloud; it was a vocal, resounding event. Notice the reason for Pliny's concern in his letter to Septicius Clarus:

I had an easy journey, apart from the fact that some of my people were taken ill in the intense heat. Indeed, my reader Encolpius (the one who is our joy for work or play) found the dust so irritating to his throat that he spat blood, and it will be a sad blow to him and a great loss to me if this makes him unfit for his services to literature when they are his main recommendation. Who else will read and appreciate my efforts or hold my attention as he does? (Pliny, *Epistulae* 8.1)⁴

Or his letter to Fuscus Salinator, describing how he spends a typical summer's day in Tuscany:

After a short sleep and another walk I read a Greek or Latin speech aloud and with emphasis, not so much for the sake of my voice as my digestion, though both are strengthened by this... At dinner, if alone with my wife or with a few friends, I have a book read aloud; after the meal we listen to a comedy or lyre playing; then I walk again with the members of my household, among whom are educated individuals. Thus the evening passes in varied discussions, and even the longest day comes to a satisfying end (Pliny, *Epistulae* 9.36).

Antiquity did not recognise the separation of the visual and aural aspects of text in the same way or to the extent we do. Hence one of the Greek words for "read" was ἀκούω, which more commonly means "hear" or "listen" (Schenkeveld 1992; Johnson 1994).⁵

Reading aloud is an important feature of ancient reading – a crucial feature of written communication which must be understood, especially the role it played, in order to deal

³ I am fully aware of the complexities involved with this statement. A good exposition of the basic consequences would be the work of Olson (1988; 1994; 1996). See also Finnegan (1988); Goody (1983); Lentz (1989); Thomas (1989); Worthington (1996).

⁴ "The heavy reliance of the Roman upper class on readers is familiar, and even for them it is clear that listening, instead of reading for oneself, always seemed natural" (Harris 1989, 226).

⁵ Cassiodorus (490-583 C.E.) remarks: "...copying the precepts of the Lord... What happy application, what praiseworthy industry, to preach unto men by means of the hand, to untie the tongue by means of the fingers" (*Senatoris Institutiones* 1.30.1). Found reference in Metzger (1992, 18).

with texts from the first century. Of course, silent reading was not only possible but practised as well.⁶

Recently Gavrilov questioned the scholarly consensus that the Greeks and Romans preferred to read aloud. He points to a range of reported incidents and references which, he contends, leaves only one conclusion: “Silent reading was a quite ordinary practice for wide circles of the free population of classical Athens” and this was still the case “in the later Roman period” (Gavrilov 1997, 68-69).

Here we find some blatant obfuscation of issues involved. It begins with a historiographical principle, the difference between citing data as evidence and *analysing* data to be interpreted as evidence. In other words, it is important to acknowledge that it is not just a case of evidence, but very much one of evidence *for what*. This “for what?” makes all the difference. The real key to Gavrilov’s (1997, 69) presentation is not the evidence quoted – a very useful list – but the final statement of his conclusion: “These ancient reflections help us to see that the phenomenon of reading itself is *fundamentally the same* in modern and in ancient culture. Cultural diversity does not exclude an underlying unity” (my italics).

A correct observation, but trivial and misleading. The fact that we all breathe does not mean that we think of air in the same way, or that we all hold breathing to be the same thing. Think of marriage: People marry today, as did people in antiquity; but consider the vast differences in values, perceptions, expectations, activities (at least when my context is set next to those of the Romans). Any claim of cultural unity is simply superficial and inconsequential.

With regard to understanding reading (and writing) activities, such supposed underlying cultural unity is proven a fallacy by the frequent *failure* of literacy programmes. The long history of literacy programmes⁷ around the world reveals a narrative of considerable inadequacies and poor results.⁸ Research on the complexities of implementing successful literacy shows that it is exactly the assumption of cultural unity which most often underlies such programmes that is the problem. Cultural unity, it turns out, is often an attempt at integration of misplaced notions about a single “truth” in society. Literacy is not something neutral

⁶ Knox (1968), who criticises the influential article by Balogh (1927) for overestimating the extent of the practice of reading aloud. Balogh cites evidence mainly from medieval times, as pointed out by Knox. But Knox *assumes* that what ancient scholars did resembles what modern scholars do in libraries, therefore he scorns the proposal that ancient scholars read every book they consulted out loud. We first need to establish what reading techniques they practised and realise that their way of study and research could have been quite strange to us. It is self-evident that if one can read one can read silently. Yet modern preferences reflect our times, our technology, our educational practices and our values. Also, note that the examples Knox gives has little to do with his thesis – namely that nothing shows that the silent reading of books was anything extraordinary – and actually shows *exceptions* to reading out aloud. See also the note of Slusser (1991) on Cyril of Jerusalem, *Pro-catechesis* 14.

⁷ A useful starting point in this regard is the work of Graff who very effectively challenges current assumptions about the necessity and benefits of literacy. Western societies have misunderstood the nature of literacy and the role it plays (or can play) in the life of the individual and society. That misunderstanding, which can be explained historically, has determined the way in which “literacy crises” are conceptualised and how they are acted upon in various Western societies (Graff 1979, 1987b). Graff (1987a) is a full-fledged history of the nature and spread of literacy from the earliest times to the present. The history of literacy in the West is one of contradictions and discontinuities rather than that of a progressive, uniform development. An over reliance on literacy as a solution to profound social problems has been at best misguided and at worst a disaster. A crucial point to take from Graff is to recognise literacy for the acquired technology that it is.

⁸ The literature is overwhelming; useful reviews of the complexities (and often negative results) in Bernardo (2000); Graff (1987a, 1987b); Hamilton and Barton (2000); Luke (2003); Olson (1999); Street (1984, 1-16, 183-228).

(or innocent), but a vast and immensely complex issue.⁹ Its meanings and contextual roles are interwoven with political, economical, technological and socio-cultural diversities. Understanding the phenomenon requires analysis of *specific* manifestations.

Manuscript Structure

There is a connection between forms of literacy and their textual structures, the material productions of literacy. The reason for emphasising such connections is to suggest a different treatment of literacy: Historical rather than formalistic (i.e., to understand writing and reading in context, rather than consider them as mere competencies). More specifically, the making of the written word – what texts look like and how they are created – also affect their use.

Darnton (1991, 159), in his analysis of *how* to research the history of reading argues that such a history should include an “...analysis ... based on analytic bibliography. By studying books as physical objects, bibliographers have demonstrated that the typographical disposition of a text can to a considerable extent determine its meaning and the way it was read.” What this means is that an “artefact is not a simple aid. That is, you can’t go out and find some cognitive artifact, and there you are, better at something” (Norman 1993, 78). Material specifics, technology and human activity interact to form a cognitive artifact. This must be taken into account when those artifacts are to be understood. Therefore, a good place to start one’s ethnography of Greco-Roman communication is the characteristics of manuscripts. When considered from a linguistic point of view, the Greeks and Romans were capable of producing highly explicit texts, and have been doing that for several centuries by the time of the early Roman Period. Considering the manuscript as a functional tool, however, leads to a very different concept of literacy.

(1) A simple juxtapositioning of a modern book and an ancient publication reveals overwhelming differences. The modern book is lightweight, small, easily manageable and *all* copies of the same publication are *exactly* alike.¹⁰ Modern books have tables of contents, title pages, indexes, distinct and even margins, chapter divisions, pages and page numbers: All make for effortless, comfortable use and access to the text itself. The ancient book is a cumbersome, unwieldy scroll, fairly readable while standing up and when the specific column of writing to be read does not matter; but physically demanding for reference and comparison.¹¹

In fact, it takes a certain knack to read a scroll, keeping it open at the required place. The skills required, coiling and uncoiling a scroll (lit. “unfolding,” ἀναπτύσσω, and “folding

⁹ See, amongst many possible references Akinnaso (1981); Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1981); Cook-Gumperz (1986); Hauteceur (2000); Luke (1996); Ogbu (1990); Resnick and Resnick (1977, 1989); Stubbs (1980). The *principle* at stake here is well put by Malina (1991, 7): “Literate people often take the process of reading for granted. Not a few readers innocent of what the reading process entails share the myth of the “immaculate perception.” Because writing is presumed to be an object “out there,” it can be observed and handled like other objects, such as rocks or trees... We call this misreading ethnocentrism, that is, imagining that all people everywhere and at all times think just like I do.”

¹⁰ If you consult a copy of *Novum Testamentum Graece*²⁷ (NA²⁷) Mark 7:17 will *always* be at the top of page 112, with exactly the same notes positioned at precisely similar points on the page, for instance. Something not only *completely* impossible in antiquity, but probably also unimaginable.

¹¹ For detail about “books” (i.e., scrolls, codices, tablets, etc.) in antiquity I made use of Bischoff (1990, 20-37); Kenyon (1951); Metzger (1968, 3-20); Turner (1987).

up,” πτύσσω) are considerable feats.¹² Part of the expertise involved with being a reader at that time was to be dexterous with unwieldy objects.

The reader grasped the upper portion of the roll in the right hand, unscrolling it as one read, holding the already read part in the left hand. When finished, the scroll would be completely rolled up in the left hand. A number of complementary gestures and movements accompanied the reading process (of which quite a few can be deduced from figurative representations, as well as literary references). Sometimes a wooden reading stand was used to hold the scroll; the device could be resting on the lap of a seated reader or placed on a low supporting column.¹³

The noteworthy fact is that the technology, that is both the possibility and knowledge of alternatives for the scroll existed.¹⁴ Large scale production of the codex started only in the seventh century C.E. “From Homer in the eighth century B.C.E. to only parity and not total displacement of the roll took more than a millennium” (Small 1997, 12).

Given that Greco-Roman writers and readers did not lack intelligence, the persistence with regard to the scroll can only be explained in terms of reading behaviour. Unlike our needs and expectations with regard to texts, ancient readers did not imagine their texts to be easily accessible and manageable, nor to be diverse sources of information. Most of those who read scrolls read “intensively.” Typically they had access to only a few books and they read them over and over again, usually aloud and in groups, so that a narrow range of traditional literature became deeply impressed on their consciousness. (Today, in contrast, many readers of books read “extensively”: All kinds of material, especially periodicals and newspapers, and read what is at hand only once, then move on to the next item, relying on technology to find and/or to return to information required).¹⁵

(2) In the following I briefly review the format of the text on the ancient scroll, aspects such as paragraphs, punctuation, layout, the use of textual apparatus and word separation.

Consider the development and standardization of the paragraph as a means of marking off stages in an argument as a way of facilitating understanding. When teaching communication skills, and especially when writing is involved, we today emphasise the use of divisions, indentation, segmentation and other procedures because they contribute to the “rational” explicitness of the writing. When viewed from this perspective, Greco-Roman textual practices appear remarkably insufficient.

The Greco-Roman attitude toward the text is striking in its disregard of a rational order. Papyri from Hellenistic times and up until the end of the Roman Period show that texts were written continuously without paragraphs, chapters or division between words and sentences (Turner 1987, 7-23; Kenyon 1951). The papyri exhibit writing which is often

¹² A practised individual takes about two minutes to roll up a scroll while standing (Skeat 1981).

¹³ Greeks and Romans did not use tables for writing or reading, though some made use of reading stands. The evidence for the use of tables for reading is slim and unconvincing; the evidence for chairs, however, is clear. Cf. Small (1997, 160-167).

¹⁴ For instance, tying sheets of papyrus together as was done with wooden tablets. The linen codex was used by the Etruscans.

¹⁵ The descriptive terms “intensive/extensive” reading come from Engelsing (1970), who is interested in demarcating the shift to “modern” reading towards the end of the eighteenth century. I use his hypothesis to illustrate a spectrum of reading styles: a slow, repeated, reverent manner on the one end and towards the other end a skimming, discarding style. Given the diversity of human individuality it is obvious that one should find all styles at various times, but the typology is useful for historical understanding in order to characterise reading practices.

jammed or cramped together producing coagulated blocks of text with no attention to rules governing the disposition of the written space or to the physical division within the text. Devices facilitating presentation and readability, such as page numbering, full punctuation and titles inserted at appropriate stages in an argument, did not form part of the textual system. Even scientific and philosophic treatises were written using arbitrary arrangements. Given these circumstances, the conventional papyrus roll was difficult to read with intelligence and almost impossible to use by way of reference to a given page or line.

In fact, basic text division was left to the readers in antiquity. Naevius' epic *Bellum Poenicum* was originally written in a single volume without a break, and was only divided into seven books *a century later* by Octavius Lampadio (according to Suetonius, *De grammaticis* 2).

The Greco-Roman text was constructed with almost no aids to the reader, whose task it was to divide the lines correctly into words and sentences. Finding one's place in complex prose argument without the aid of a system of reference or a scheme of division was an obvious source of difficulty and confusion. In any text of some length, and – most noteworthy – even in literary texts, readers were required to know the correct divisions *in advance*.

Many scholars have commented on the Greco-Roman practice of writing without separating words or sentences as well as the lack of textual expressions to expedite determining the sequence of what was written. Even the rather simple combination of lower and upper case letters greatly facilitates comprehension of a text – another feature that ancient authors ignored to a remarkable extent.

Consider the lack or very limited presence of punctuation in ancient texts. Punctuation functions as prosody or breathing, an aspect of speech; and as grammar. In antiquity prosody was emphasized, while the syntactical uses of punctuation do not appear until the Middle Ages. Morrison (1987, 244) suggests that to the Greeks and Romans their texts were never more than a “variant of oral utterance due to the lack of procedures for transforming *writing* into text.” Only in the medieval period with the codex and its page format does “true” text appear. When the papyri are compared to later developments in the technique, design and layout of texts, it is clear that the Greco-Roman attitude toward written language had not evolved beyond a variant of oral utterance due to the lack of procedures for transforming *writing* into text.

A brief digression is necessary to elaborate this point. We, nowadays, practice writing which employs a number of formulas reflecting a shift from oral to visual. In fact, formulas structuring writing are an essential characteristic of printed texts. However, this transition from “speaking in text” to “writing in text” can only be conceived of when a text is *seen* to include more than a succession of prose statements or sentences. It must be seen to include an apparatus which proposes a formal structure for a line of reasoning which makes explicit reference to the context created in the act of schematising an extensive work. Formulas such as: “In this section we shall,” “In the next paragraphs,” “I suggested above,” “Below, I reiterate,” “In contrast,” “for example,” and others refer the reader to a class of textual statements which remains distinct or separate from the strictly linguistic or literary structure of a work. They establish the relative continuity of extended discourse that is written within the codes of the printed form. Statements of this class and type set coordinate the means by which the text refers to its relative order of material of which the distribution is accordingly structured into units of the text such as section, heading, paragraph, the page and chapter: *Writing* into text and not *speech*.

When we examine writings from antiquity, including copies of historical works (such as of Herodotus and Thucydides) among especially the papyri finds, we find ourselves very clearly

within the realm of alphabetic literacy, but we do not find formal structures linking the accumulation of information to formulas making reference to the medium of the writing as such. There is an absence of a textual apparatus governing the movement from section to section. Statements linking narrative to the formal units of the text, such as the “book” or “chapter,” are by and large absent and hamper the possibility of referring synoptically forward as in an accumulation of points, or backward in an appraisal of what has been said relative to section transitions. The simple fact that requires contextualisation is that these writings are *orally contrived texts*. The point I want to add to this fairly straight-forward observation is the underlying implication of such composition and reading: The role of memory.

In contrast to the links which characterise a visually contrived textual work, Greco-Roman writings assume continuity from utterance to utterance on behalf of the reader; writings which are clearly assimilated to *hearers*, as in an oral culture. Contextual and structuring information is physically absent; there are very few if any such indications in the writing itself. Structuring was to be provided by the reader/audience – an assumption that reader/audience will “prepare” and “perform” the actual reading.

It is noteworthy that Quintilian (1.1.31), discussing the education of the orator does not mention the unit of the sentence: “Then with these very syllables let [the student] begin to understand words and with these to construct a speech [*sermo*].” Although limited forms of punctuation were used to mark the unit of the word for Latin in certain periods, the reader still had to read aloud in order to construe the words into phrases and then into sentences. So Quintilian recommends:

In ...connection [with reading] there is much that can only be taught by practice, as for instance when the boy should take breath, at what point he should introduce a pause into a line, where the sense ends or begins, when the voice should be raised or lowered, what modulation should be given to each phrase... I will give but one golden rule: To do all these things, he must understand what he reads (1.8.1-2).

Of course, as can be easily discovered by studying the material aspects of papyri, textual apparatus was not unknown, but its use in actual writings, even writings of length and of considerable importance, remained rudimentary. Punctuation occurs, but is unsystematic, and sometimes of a remarkably complex nature. Saenger (1982, 377-379; 1991, 205-207) maintains that the adoption of word separation began first in the British Isles, because the native readers learned Latin as a second language and needed the extra help of the spaces to parse Latin texts into words. According to Gamble (1995, 229-230), because early Christian texts were often meant for reading aloud, by the fourth century C.E. scribes began to arrange the text in visual chunks that matched “semantic units,” though each unit still consisted of lines with no breaks for the words within them.

Another datum that needs integration into an ethnography of ancient communication is the fact that they did not consider the concept of the written word as a visual unit to be important (although antiquity knew the concept of the word as a unit of speech). Contrast this with our textual aids, which depend, almost without exception, on the individual word. If you want to find something in a dictionary, thesaurus, encyclopedia, catalogue, indices or almost any reference, including the Web, you look it up by the unit of the word. Consider Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s description of how children learn to read:

When we are taught to read, first we learn by heart the names of the letters, then their shapes and their values, then, in the same way, the syllables and their effects, and finally words and their properties, by which I mean the ways they are lengthened, shortened, and scanned, and similar functions. And when we have acquired knowledge of these things, we begin to write

and read, syllable by syllable and slowly at first. It is only when a considerable lapse of time has implanted firmly in our minds the forms of the words that we execute them with the utmost ease, and we read through any scroll that is given to us unfalteringly and with incredible confidence and speed. (*De compositione verborum* 25)

In the Greco-Roman curriculum, writing preceded reading and copying from a model was introduced at the beginning of the curriculum (Cribiore 1996, 242-249).

What explanation can be offered to account for the lack of tolerance for the reader? Discussing the instability of classical Greek writing, Youtie (1974, 17, footnote 6) notes that it “might well have created a preference for reading aloud [which] provided, contrary to modern expectation, a quicker route to intelligibility than mere visual inspection.”

Indeed, the most common way of reading was reading aloud, at all levels and for all functions. A text might be read directly or, (quite often) it was read by a reader intervening between the text and the listener or listeners. More than one reader could also be utilised and particularly the reading of literary texts usually involved multiple readers. These practices illustrate a writing style dominated by rhetoric, and its categories were adopted by all literary forms such as poetry, historiography, biography and philosophical and scientific treatises. Such texts (especially when read aloud before an audience) required a strong articulate reading style, in which the reader’s tone of voice and cadences were adjusted to the nature of the writing and its stylistic effects.

Above I mentioned ἀκούω as a verb for reading; in Latin the verb used for poetic reading is often *cantare* (Quinn 1982, 155-158) – the adjective *canore* indicating the voice interpreting poetry. Clearly a *different* bodily experience is involved here; a physical attitude that demanded a high level of technical skill and a broad culture. Even today, “inner speech increases when people are reading passages they find difficult” (Ellis and Beattie 1986, 227; Crowder and Wagner 1992, 161, cf. 156-188). Svenbro offers an interesting analogy:

Their [people in antiquity] relation to the written word might perhaps be compared to our relation to musical notation: Not that it is impossible to read music in silence, but the most common way of doing it is playing it on an instrument or singing it out aloud [sic] in order to know what it sounds like. (Svenbro 1989, 236)

In antiquity the default was oral reading, even if *sotto voce* when dealing with delicate communications (Schenkeveld 1992; Starr 1991). Outside of reading public announcements, short letters or messages – which was facilitated by the repetition of certain formulas (Martin 1994, 71-72) – vocal articulation was a great help to understanding the meaning of a text. Literary works were “published” at collective ceremonies, *recitationes*. Such expressive forms of reading characterised reading practice; social gatherings associated with cementing patron-client relations, new social contacts, and perpetuating the habits of the cultured elite. *Recitationes* were held in places called *auditoria*, *stationes* and *theatra*.

The relevant point – in terms of an ethnography of communication – is the recognition of the extensive role of memorising and memory. Today we think of writing as an external store that substitutes for internal memory. Though the connection between writing and memory was apparent for writers and readers of the Roman Period, reading was considered more a means of retrieval of what is inside of oneself.

Citing From and Referring to Manuscripts in Antiquity

It was not until after antiquity, especially from the Renaissance on, that readers felt a need for precise citation that never seemed to arise in our ancient forebears. When a classical

writer cites another, he uses the same kind of vague reference as when making references within his own writings. The modern system of citation began in the thirteenth century (Rouse and Rouse 1991, 221-255).

A concept of the page simply did not exist in antiquity. Pages could not be cited, not just because works were written on rolls, but because each roll was individually produced by hand and could vary tremendously in the amount written in any given width and column.¹⁶ The codex was no better, since it too was subject to the same idiosyncracies of individual, handwritten production. Fixed formats do not appear until print.

Even something as self-evident (to us) as alphabetisation was adopted remarkably late (Rouse and Rouse 1991, 191-219). In fact, “the adoption of *alphabetic order* for the arrangement of concepts and the invention of techniques of reference required by the *subject index*, taken together constitute a major change in medieval society’s perception of its relationship to the written heritage” (Rouse and Rouse 1991, 7). The practices of scholarship in the Roman period can be described as “rote familiarity with a finite body of authority, arranged according to rational principles and retained by memory” (Rouse and Rouse 1991, 218).

The table of contents does appear in writings from antiquity, but as a fairly rare occurrence. Pliny the Elder ends what we call the “Preface” to his *Naturalis historia*, but which is actually a covering letter to the emperor, with an explanation:

As it was my duty in the public interest to have consideration for the claims upon your [Titus’s] time, I have appended to this letter a list of contents of the several books, and have taken very careful precautions to prevent your having to read them from cover to cover. By these means you will ensure that others do not need to peruse them either, but only look for whatever each of them wants, and will know in what place to find it (Pliny, *Naturalis historia* pref. 33).

What has been translated in English editions as “a table of contents” is rather misleading. Literally Pliny says “I have attached to this letter what is contained in the individual books” (*quid singulis contineretur libris huic epistulae subiunxi...*). Each section of the actual listing starts with a verb, *continentur* (“are contained”), and not a noun (“contents”). The list could not have been a table of contents because there was no means of referring to the precise locations where things were discussed. Pliny’s list of contents takes up an entire ancient roll (in an English translation more than seventy pages of small type). Remember that the roll with the contents is not only long, but without divisions – none for paragraphs, sentences or words. Imagine the Emperor Titus with his new gift, Pliny’s set of scrolls, and imagine the process of reading the more than one hundred columns of writing making up the list of contents to find the particular item one wants, then going to the roll that contains that item, and then reading through that until one reaches the item. Surely no speedy process! In fact, Pliny’s list is practically useless as a reader’s guide.

Why this complete lack of attention to possibilities for making things easier for the reader? These are intelligent men, and the technology for indexing or page references was available (and familiar to them). I think it is because they perceived the role, function and responsibilities of the reader different from what we do. To them, reading entailed a good bit of memorising.

¹⁶ “The number of lines varies with the height of the column and the size of the writing; but numbers less than 25 or more than 45 are exceptional. Neither in the roll nor later in the codex, where reference was easy, as it could never have been with the roll, was the ancient scribe concerned to keep the same number of lines to a column. The number of letters to a line similarly varied” (Kenyon and Roberts 1970, 173).

Memorising as Part of Ancient Reading

Quintilian's (11.2.33) recommendation to murmur your text as you read forces one to focus directly on what one is reading, reducing the ability to notice distractions. Baddeley (1990, 72, cf. 71-95) has noted the importance of the "phonological loop" for short-term memory. The phonological loop has two parts: The memory store that holds "speech-based information and articulatory control process based on inner speech." Generally, memory of speech fades rapidly (after about 2 seconds), but vocal rehearsal refreshes the memory store. Information from the articulatory control process returns it to the short-term memory store. Whether murmuring or reading aloud clearly not only aids the process of construing the *scriptio continua*, but also provides its own feedback and reinforcement.

It is also noteworthy that although Quintilian claims the superiority of the eye over the ear when it comes to memory, modern testing has conclusively proven the opposite, if only one sense, hearing or seeing is involved, one will remember better if the thing to be remembered is spoken than if one reads it (Baddeley 1990, 31-33). Add to this the simple fact that punctuation was the responsibility of the *reader*. The use of *scriptio continua* forced the reader to punctuate the text but also aided the reader in memorising, in making the text truly one's own.

Reading as an Interactive Activity

One evening at the end of the first century Pliny the Younger left the house of a friend in Rome in a state of indignation. As soon as he reached his home, he wrote about that night's events to the lawyer Claudius Restitutus:

[a]nd I feel I have to write to you at once, as there is no chance of telling the whole story in person. The work that was read was highly polished in every way, but two or three witty people or so they seemed to themselves and a few others listened to it like deaf-mutes. They never opened their lips or moved a hand, or even rose to their feet to change from their seated postures. What's the point of all this sober demeanour and learning, or rather of this laziness and conceit, this lack of tact and good sense, which makes one spend an entire day giving offence and turning into an enemy the man one came to hear as one's dearest friend? (Pliny, *Epistulae* 6.17).

A curious incident – and a remarkable example of the distance between modern and ancient reading of texts. "Publishing" was done by means of public readings which clearly were social ceremonies. As with any other ceremony, there was an established etiquette for both the listeners and the authors. This is nicely illustrated in a letter written by Pliny to Suetonius, asking advice about his poor reading skills:

I am told that I read badly – I mean when I read verse, for I can manage speeches, though this seems to make my verse reading all the worse! So, as I am planning to give an informal reading to my personal friends, I am thinking of making use of one of my freedmen. This is certainly treating them informally, as the man I have chosen is not really a good reader, but I think he will do better than I can as long as he is not nervous... Now, I don't know what I am to do myself while he is reading, whether I am to sit still and silent like a mere spectator, or do as some people and accompany his words with lips, eye, and gesture (*Epistulae* 9.34).

The listeners were expected to interact with the "performance," even provide critical response.

These brief references have to suffice here, but the principle is evident: By and large reading in antiquity was a complex communal event.

It is noteworthy that when Pliny Junior describes his uncle's reading habits there are *always* two people involved. Either Pliny (Senior) dictates the passages he wishes to excerpt to his secretary or the secretary reads to him and Pliny takes down the passage (Pliny, *Epistulae* 3.5.10-15). Reading and note taking was a joint activity (Bonner 1977, 127; Kenney 1982, 16).

Composition and Memorised Reading

To understand reading, I have emphasised that we must understand something of the practices of writing: "There is a relationship between the physical form of an artifact and the function it is meant to serve" (Rouse and Rouse 1991, 4). In this section I want to explore another aspect of that relationship: What *composition* reveals about reading conventions. In the context of an orally oriented communication technology, composition and performance of writings are aspects of the same process, and the one cannot be understood without reference to the other. Essentially, I propose to apply an insight gained from the study by Mary Carruthers (1990), *The Book of Memory*, to Greco-Roman reading culture.

The study by Carruthers is an impressive, wide-ranging account of the workings and functions of memory in medieval society. She points out that *memory* was the psychological faculty valued above all others from antiquity through to the Renaissance. "It is my contention that medieval culture was fundamentally memorial, to the same profound degree that modern culture in the West is documentary. This distinction... involves technologies – mnemotechnique and printing – but is not confined to them" (Carruthers 1990, 8).

She discusses medieval memory systems as a kind of artificial intelligence; the medieval assumption being that human learning is above all based in memorative processes. She shows how the written page was understood to be a memory device, how mnemonic techniques affected literary composition, and how reading itself was regarded as an activity of the memory. "*Memoria* refers not to how something is communicated, but to what happens once one has received it, to the interactive process of familiarizing – or textualizing – which occurs between oneself and others' words in memory" (Carruthers 1990, 13).

Such a comprehensive, interdisciplinary study of memory in the Roman world is unfortunately not yet available. It would be a very difficult undertaking in any case, if not impossible, for want of proper and representative evidence. Yet it should be clear that antiquity parallels medieval reading practices in many ways. Enough has already been referred to, to allow the claim that similar memory related strategies played a role in communication during Roman times. The incidental information that can be gleaned from ancient authors with regard to actual reading and composing activities and skills clearly reveals a world close to the one drawn by Carruthers.

It is well known that the Greek poets did not write anything down until the very last phase of composition. Without exception teachers of the Roman world emphasise *cogitatio*: Mental preparation *before* writing. Premeditation was the key to writing.

Extensive memorisation was the dominant characteristic of Greco-Roman education. It is in this context that Quintilian calls memory the treasure-chest of eloquence (*thesaurus eloquentiae*: 9.2.1). The equation of treasure directly to memory and only indirectly to writing relies on the fact that it is memory and not a superior filing technique that allows the Greco-Roman writer to retrieve the appropriate saying or narrative.

Structure in most ancient writings is clearly mnemotechnically oriented, based on a logic of recollection, which is associative and determined by individual habit. Ancient *tituli* and punctuation were meant to aid mnemonic division, deliberately inviting memorial *compositio*. Reading the written product assumes a recollective process by means of which a particular reader engages a particular text on a particular occasion.

Above I referred to Pliny's letter to Fuscus Salinator. Pliny mentions how pleasing he finds it, early in the mornings, to lie in darkness, with his eyes not determining "the direction of my thinking" and to visualise his writing:

If I have anything on hand I work it out in my head, choosing and correcting the wording, and the amount I achieve depends on the ease or difficulty with which my thoughts can be marshalled and kept in my head. Then I call my secretary, the shutters are opened, and I dictate what I have put in to shape; he goes out, is recalled and again dismissed (Pliny, *Epistulae* 9.36).

No scribbled outlines, frameworks, to-do lists. No consulting of summaries, index cards or keywords. Composition was a memory based activity. Plotinus, according to Porphyry:

...worked out his train of thought from beginning to end in his own mind, and then, when he wrote it down, since he had set it all in order in his mind, he wrote as continuously as if he was copying from a book (Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 8).

A remarkable contemporary illustration of this way of "working" with sources and other material to compose in memory *before committing to writing* is the experiences of John Hull (New Testament and Religious Education scholar). As author and lecturer Hull had to adjust to writing lectures in his head when he went blind during his forties:

I now seem to have developed a way of scanning ahead in my mind, to work out what I am going to say. Everybody does this in ordinary speech; otherwise we couldn't complete a sentence. Somehow or other, and without effort, I have developed a longer perspective, and now when I am speaking I can see paragraphs coming up from the recesses of my mind. It is a bit like reading them off a scanner. While I am speaking, another part of my mind is sorting out into paragraphs what I am going to be saying in the next few minutes, and a yet more remote part is selecting alternative lines of argument from a sort of bank of material. This seems to give my lecturing style a greater sense of order than I had before, and people seem to be able to follow me more easily (Hull 1990, 123-124).

Keep in mind that Hull's lecture material is more complicated than typically dictated texts today (such as business letters). Compare this with Cicero's counsel:

I would not have the structure obtrude itself in such trivialities; but a practised pen will nevertheless easily find the method of composition. For as the eye looks ahead in reading, so in speaking the mind will foresee what is to follow (Cicero, *De oratore* 44.150).

Hull also describes how he organises his material:

A sighted author tends to paragraph his or her work retrospectively. You see the stuff unrolling on the typewriter or screen, and you think that it is about time you started a new paragraph. A person listening to books on cassettes, where the actual paragraphs in the printed page are not normally indicated, does his own paragraphing, and when composing tends to project this into the future of the composition. I think that this also helps me to organize my material in advance when I am speaking in public. A sighted lecturer reading from a type-script concentrates mainly upon what he has said, that is, the paragraphs slip away behind him as he "swims" forward through his speech. A blind speaker has to concentrate entirely

upon what he is about to say, or what he will be saying fifteen minutes from now, because otherwise he will lose direction (Hull 1990, 124).

The way Hull uses his memory to understand something he hears from a tape is directly comparable to the way someone in antiquity would have heard a book being read. He says, "I have not put any particular effort into learning how to [remember structure in a written work read to me]... You tend to make unconscious mental notes of the structure so that you can go back again if necessary" (Hull 1990, 124).

The memorising process works in both directions: It helps one compose in the mind and it helps one follow an oral "reading."

Rethinking Some 'Common Wisdom'

A very necessary step for a responsible interpretation of ancient communication is to become aware of tacit assumptions. We must replace our misleading, modern view of ancient reading activities with a more nuanced view that takes into account their historical, religious, intellectual and psychological situation.

In his discussion of the religious views of the people in the Roman world, MacMullen (1984, 10-11, 21) notes how these "strike a modern reader as alien or outlandish." This is partly the effect of how we simply overestimate and overrate textual evidence, because "[p]oints of contact and media of communication that we take for granted in our world simply did not exist in antiquity." However, those people were neither stupid nor "undeveloped." They did not just *lack* something, they made different use of things. The challenge is not to describe them by means of subtracting what we have, but to imaginatively *reconstruct* a fuller, more complex system of ancient communication.

Particularly useful is the critical concept employed by anthropologists: Visualism. "The term is to connote a cultural, ideological bias towards vision as the "noblest sense" and towards geometry qua graphic-spatial conceptualization as the most "exact" way of communicating knowledge" (Fabian 1983, 106). Not only are we "deaf" to the oral-aural worlds of other, less technologised communication systems, we reduce the symbolic forms of ancient people to "stuff," to disembodied things.¹⁷

Meaning and communication is about much more than delineating sources or labelling textual strategies. As an "object" of knowledge, the communicative event (experience) of an ancient author and his audiences are processed by us with visual-spatial tools and methods.¹⁸

Modern literary theories, when applied directly to ancient literature, have tended to obscure the very *foreignness* of that literature, its ancient *Romanness*, and to present those authors as crypto-moderns, subverters of tradition in an anti-establishment mode. Giving proper due to the fundamental role of memorising and memory – with all the various aspects which that cultural modality involves – redresses imbalances in this regard.

¹⁷ It is quite a challenge to think about reading and writing "without tacitly erecting our own standards of expectation concerning the correspondence between the written and the spoken word into cultural panchronic universals" (Harris 1986, 154).

¹⁸ An adaptation of a description of Bauman (1986, 2). Bauman argues that study of oral literature should be done in an integrative spirit, with a performance-centred conception of these traditions as scholars operate within a frame of reference dominated by the canons of elite, modern literary perceptions (Bauman 1986, 1-10).

The Synoptic Problem and Q

An immediate and very obvious implication of the argument presented here would be to the synoptic problem and the Q hypothesis.

Considered within the context of ancient reading practices, the *linear, literary* connections seen as a solution to the so-called synoptic problem become highly problematic. With the rejection of the “original form” concept (Kelber 1980, 33), most of the current reconstruction of pre-gospel traditions becomes dubious. If the gospel authors *listened* to Q and the other sayings traditions, one cannot possibly apply the concept of an original version in reconstructing them – to cite Kelber’s own criticism.¹⁹

Taking into account the role memorising played in reading and composition, we can place our understanding of the synoptic relationships on a more sound footing, at last achieving something of a historical understanding of the synoptic Gospels as first-century writings.

Imagine Luke (or Matthew) making a synopsis to guide access to his text, after completing the dictation (*a la* Pliny the Elder). Imagine Mark (or Luke) reading/preparing to read/present the Jesus story. Imagine Matthew (or Mark) “researching” scrolls to compose, in memory, his own writing...

What Horsley (1999, 7-8) says about Q, contrasting his approach to conventional source criticism, I would like to extend to the gospels:

In contrast with focusing on and attempting to establish (1) the transmission (2) of an individual saying (3) to another individual (4) who cognitively grasped the meaning of its words, this evolving approach to an oral-derived text focuses on and attempts to appreciate (1) the public performance (2) of a whole discourse or set of discourses focused on issues of common concern (3) to a community gathered for common purposes (4) who in the performance experience certain events verbally enacted and/or are affected by the performance. The transmission, individual sayings, individuals, and cognitive meaning would all have been included in the broader process of public performance of discourses addressed to communities who experienced events in verbal enactments, as can be seen in some brief elaboration.

In a way this is to argue for the relative independence of the Gospels, against theories of literary dependence, by invoking a history as well as a theory of reader activity embedded in an ethnography of communication. What often happens in New Testament scholarship is that “oral tradition” gets smuggled into the discussion without a formal examination of that category, merely in order to cover up difficulties with a purely documentary solution. This paper attempts to counter that tendency.

Concluding Remarks

Historians of dress, costume and ornamentation often criticise contemporary displays of period costume, including when actors wear period costumes, for emphasis on appearance. A realistic display demands that not only the outer, but also the inner garments must be

¹⁹ With regard to the question of Q, note that Kelber’s criticism of traditional *Traditionsgeschichte* undermines the methodological basis on which the identification of Q rests. In other words, if one accepts Kelber’s criticism of “the dominant paradigm of linearity” one must realise that that paradigm is precisely what underlies most of the research done on the synoptic traditions and specifically on Q. Moreover, if it is true that scholars have not really grasped what the oral foundations of the synoptic traditions entail, their reconstruction of it must be defective. Kelber (1983) has developed his initial proposals considerably, see Kelber (1989, 1994, 2002). I still think that he tries to incorporate too much of traditional thinking about the history of the synoptic tradition into his approach (e.g., the Q hypothesis).

accurate or the actors will not move in the right way. A similar situation faces anyone trying to interpret Greco-Roman antiquity. We have a pretty good idea of the surface – how things looked – but when we try to animate the scene all the people walk with a modern stride. I have emphasised that well-known aspects of ancient literacy require more than description; they must also be interpreted, i.e. the particular forms of display and retrieval of textual information in handwritten manuscripts, are data for an ethnography of ancient communication.

Literacy is not merely the ability to write or to read. *How* one reads and writes matters. As students of the first-century Mediterranean world and early Christianity, our task with regard to understanding their literacy, their reading and writing, has barely been begun.

To conclude, a paragraph from Mary Carruthers (1990, 260), perfectly apposite to my investigation:

As I sought to understand the texts I was studying, they became stranger to me than I had thought them to be, yet their strangeness, I discovered, lay in my expectations. I had continually to adjust my preconceptions, not only about... [various periods], but about unexamined basics, such as the nature of “memory,” “mind,” “imitation,” and “book.” Many things I had believed could not be done, such as composing difficult works at length from memory, had to be entertained as possibilities – even as expected and much admired behaviour.

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