

# The Difference Listening Makes

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The sensorium of contemporary biblical scholarship and the sensorium of the Bible and ancient media are inextricably linked. The presuppositions about the media world of the Bible shape the ways in which the “texts” are perceived now and are interpreted in their original context. The sensorium of current biblical scholarship, that is, the sensory matrix of biblical study, is predominantly a sensorium of sight. The biblical texts are examined by looking at them with one’s eyes. It is normal to walk the office corridors of biblical scholars and hear nothing behind those doors. And the classes of biblical scholars rarely echo with the sounds of biblical compositions while reference to and discussion of the texts is omnipresent.

To the degree that biblical scholarship has as its goal the interpretation of the Bible in its original historical context, the implicit justification for this sensory system of sight is that it corresponds to the sensorium of the biblical world. The presupposition is that biblical authors were writing texts that were read by individual readers, usually in silence. The terms “texts,” “authors,” and “readers” are ubiquitous in the commentaries, monographs, and articles of biblical scholarship and they refer to this underlying concept of the Bible and ancient media. Exegesis is based on the reconstructed experience of readers of texts. The underlying assumption is that there is essential continuity between the sensorium of the Bible in its original context and the sensorium of 21<sup>st</sup> century biblical scholarship.

The problem is that recent research into the media culture of antiquity has revealed that this assumption is false. The sensorium of the literature of the ancient world was predominantly a sensory world of sound. Classic stories such as the Iliad were memorized and performed in all night orgies of sound. Literary works were read aloud for groups. The receivers of ancient literature were usually audiences rather than individual readers. Furthermore, in those instances of individuals reading manuscripts, they usually read aloud.

The recognition of the centrality of sound is in part based an inference from the preponderance of evidence that most people in the ancient world were illiterate. Current estimates are that the rates of illiteracy in the various regions of the ancient near east in the biblical periods were 85%-95%. The probability is that there were increasing rates of literacy in the millennium from 1000 BCE to 100 CE during which most of the works of biblical literature were composed. But while literacy rates undoubtedly increased, the overall rate remained very low. Most people couldn’t read. The literary compositions of this period were composed and performed for predominantly illiterate audiences.

During this period (approximately 1000 BCE-100CE) in which the compositions of the Bible were produced, literate culture gradually expanded from a small, elite culture of scribes to a much wider network of writing and reading that in turn generated the

characteristic institutions of literate culture: military and economic empires, libraries, schools, and bookstores. The primary centers of literacy—Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, Rome—were also the centers of political and economic power. All of these institutions appeared during this period of the gradual ascendancy of literacy. But that wider communications network of the literate including literate slaves remained a predominantly elite group of the classes of power. The communication of the products of this literate to the illiterate minority took place by performances.

In the current discussion about “orality” and “literacy,” there has been an extensive critique of the so-called “Great Divide” theory. This theory has called attention to the major differences between “oral culture” and “literate culture” and has emphasized the radicality of this transition. Rather than conceiving this transition as a “seamless” and natural transition as was characteristic of form criticism, this body of research has emphasized both the psychological and sociological differences between these two cultures and their communication systems. The critique of this theory has identified the ways in which individuals and institutions have integrated these two communication systems and have formed multi-faceted syntheses of orality and literacy.

There are, therefore, major areas of ambiguity that remain pertaining to the presence and role of manuscripts and memory. To what degree were the manuscripts, if present, memorized? When did reading of manuscripts in worship begin? How available were manuscripts of the Gospels? How much of a Gospel was performed at any particular gathering? These are specific dimensions of the larger ambiguities: the degree to which oral culture and oral tradition continued in the context of the ongoing evolution of literate culture, the role of memory, the modes of performance as public reading in worship became the dominant audience experience of the Bible, and the use and character of chant in ancient performance.

There is, however, one area in which there is no ambiguity: sound. Since 85-95% of persons were illiterate, the only way in which the vast majority of persons could experience biblical compositions was by hearing them performed. Individual reading was relatively unusual because of the limited availability of manuscripts. And when individuals read manuscripts, they usually read aloud. Silent reading was rare and anomalous. Therefore, whether told from memory with no manuscript, or read from a manuscript as became increasingly prevalent in the second century, the compositions of the New Testament were experienced as sound. That is, the sensory registers that were activated by the performance of biblical compositions were predominantly auditory.

Furthermore, this continued to be the dominant sensory character of the Bible until the advent of mass printing of vernacular translations, the extension of silent reading in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the advent of historical criticism. Thus, for example, the King James translation in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century was structured for public readings in churches, with an initial publication of a series of large pulpit Bibles.

The implication of this realization about the media world of antiquity is that there is a foundational discontinuity rather than continuity between the sensorium of the Bible and the sensorium of contemporary biblical scholarship. The problem with the assumption of continuity between these two media worlds is that we as biblical scholars are deceived into thinking that we have experienced the Bible when we read the “text” with our eyes only. If the biblical documents were compositions and recordings of sound, they are only experienced when they are heard. We now know that the auditory and visual perceptual systems of the human brain are located in separate and distinct places. Hearing and seeing are different systems of perception and knowledge. As a result, when the Gospel of Mark, for example, is heard with our ears, we literally perceive a different set of sensory stimuli than if we read it with our eyes.

Reading Exodus or Mark in silence is like reading the manuscript of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and never hearing the music. We are like the deaf Beethoven who was present at the first performance of his greatest work but heard nothing. If biblical compositions are read in silence, they are a different set of sensory stimuli than what the original composers/authors intended. The intention and assumption of the “composers” of the biblical books was that every receiver would perceive the compositions with their ears in interaction with a performer. Their compositions were always for “those who have ears to hear.”

I will state this issue as provocatively as I can. If the Bible was originally composed in a sensorium of sound, when the Bible is only read now as a “text” (in silence with our eyes), the Bible has not been perceived. If we as biblical interpreters only read the Bible as a “text” and claim to interpret the Bible in its original historical context, we are engaged in systemic misrepresentation and fraud. Our studies claim to be an investigation of the original documents. But our studies are actually an analysis of a different set of sensory data than was originally structured and intended by the composers of the biblical compositions. As a result of this discontinuity, many of our conclusions about the meanings of biblical “texts” in their original context are, so to speak, wrong headed. We have used the wrong parts of our heads to perceive them.

If we want to perceive and interpret the Bible in its original historical context, it is necessary for our sensory system to correspond with the sensorium in and for which they were composed. This would be in contrast to our present situation in which we have read back our sensory system into the ancient world. The question is: how can we begin to perceive and study the Bible as sound? If there is the possibility that the Bible was originally composed as sounds to be performed for audiences, what difference would it make if we began to listen to the compositions with our auditory sensors rather than reading the texts with our visual sensors. What difference would listening make?