

The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media Group: History and Future

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Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Nov 2008

We gather today to celebrate and evaluate the work of the Bible in ancient and modern media group on the 25th anniversary of its inception. In this paper I want to reflect on its purpose, its history, and its challenges for the future. The initial purpose of the group was to bring biblical study into the context of research on the development and impact of communication technology on the understanding and interpretation of the Bible. The purpose of the group was to bring biblical study into the context of 20th-century research on communications technology (in short, media). In the 20th century a new field of research developed, the field of communications or, as it has been popularly known, media studies. The study of media grew out of the need to understand the impact of the new communications technology that developed in the late 19th and early 20th century. Initial pioneering figures in this field were Harold Lazenfeld, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and in the broad field of religion and communications, Father Walter Ong. In the biblical field, Werner Kelber was the first scholar to publish a major work, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, that explored the implications of media research for the biblical field.

With the discovery of electricity, new possibilities for communication quickly developed. The invention of the telegraph and telephone, radio, the phonograph, motion pictures, television, and the computer were the foundation of a multifaceted revolution in communication technology. Seen in the context of the history of human civilization, the development of electronic means of communication has been the most comprehensive change in the media of human communication in human history since the development of the technology of writing in the ancient world. The development of writing and the culture of literacy has been in a more or less constant process of change and development since its inception sometime in the mid- to late third millennium BCE. It required approximately 3000 years of development before literacy became the central communications system for a culture.

The formation of literate culture in ancient Babylon, Athens, and Jerusalem in the period from 500 BCE to 100 CE were parallel developments of immense importance for the future. In Athens we see the emergence of the characteristic institutions of literate culture: writers, copyists, booksellers, libraries, the Academy, learned societies, democratic government, an educational system of schools, commercial and military empires. In Jerusalem and the communities of ancient Israel, we see the formation of the characteristic institutions of religion in literate culture: holy books, scribes, a canon of holy books, translations of holy books into new languages, the synagogue, rabbis and scholars, religious schools, literate religious communities organized around a library, multinational religious communities, and the Bible itself. In the 2000 years since the development of these characteristic institutions of culture and religion in the matrix of literate culture, the communication system of literacy has become the dominant system of communication in the world. But having been conceived and founded in the context of

the highly interiorized literate culture of the Enlightenment, the work of the Society of Biblical literature is now being pursued in the context of the first post-literate culture in history.)

The purpose of the Bible in ancient and modern media group has been to initiate research into the interaction of the Bible and communications technology from the first appearance of written manuscripts in ancient Israel sometime in the late 2nd millennium until the present emergence of electronic and now digital media, approximately 4000 years. The group was and has continued to be composed of New Testament scholars who were involved in rhetorical, literary, or narrative criticism. The initial conception of the group emerged in opposition to the dominant concept of the Bible and its historical critical study within the matrix of the documentary culture of the Enlightenment. That concept and its dominant methodology is based on the assumption that the Bible was and is a text read by readers in silence. When seen in the context of the history of media, it is now evident in large part as a result of our work that this is an inadequate understanding of the interaction of the Bible and communication technology.

In the context of the media system of the ancient world, the Bible was sound that was recorded in manuscripts and was processed through human memory in a variety of ways. Biblical written compositions were usually performed and heard by audiences, though private reading aloud of manuscripts was also practiced. In the context of the media system of the modern world, the Bible is a matrix of texts, recordings, videos and movies, liturgical performances, and digital stuff. In fact, apart from the oral performances of the Bible for modern audiences, mainly in churches and synagogues, the Bible and its interpretation is now a vast complex of digitally written and produced books, digital texts and interactions on the Internet, a wide array of digital sounds and images and programs. That is, the operative assumption in the community of biblical scholarship about the media character of the Bible is invalid. The Bible then and now is far more than a library of silent texts studied by readers with their eyes. It has become clear in these 25 years that this assumption (that the Bible was a series of silent texts read by readers in silence) is a massive media anachronism. This foundational assumption of authors writing and editing texts for readers then and now that continues to be operative in virtually all historical critical studies of the Bible is flawed and inaccurate.

Furthermore, the assumption that we will be able to preserve fundamental continuity of meaning by continuing to teach and interpret the Bible as a silent text in seminaries, universities and churches in the context of digital culture is also flawed. Inevitably, the cultural relativity of the Bible as a silent text will become antiquarian and will be experienced as meaningful only in the context of an earlier stage of communication culture. The entire enterprise of historical criticism needs to recognize that it was formed in the Enlightenment for the interpretation of the Bible in the culture of silent reading and of what Hans Frei has called "meaning as reference." It is an enterprise whose value is culturally relative. As the culture in and for which it was formed declines in its power, so also the enterprise of historical criticism in its classical form will decline in its power. Only by changing its basic assumptions (in light of both the Bible's original media character as sounds performed for audiences and the present post-literate, digital media

context of biblical study now) will biblical scholarship continue to be a source of progressive energy for religious and educational communities. If it does not, the interpretation of the Bible will be wedded to the documentary culture of the past and will become increasingly a force of religious and cultural conservatism. That will have ongoing value and will undoubtedly continue in a minority subculture. But that will be a very different role than it has had in the past as the vanguard of an emerging culture.

I will state this as explicitly as possible. In the context of earlier changes in the dominant system of communication, the Bible and its interpretation has been a major progressive force in enabling the new culture organized around the new communication technology to be extended and integrated with the past. This was true at the time of the formation of manuscript culture in the ancient world, the print culture of the Reformation and the Renaissance, and the documentary culture of the Enlightenment. In each instance, new religious, educational, and political structures were formed that adapted the Bible to the new technology and provided essential continuity for that new culture with the religious traditions of the past. One of the principal foundations of those new institutions was new methods of biblical study and interpretation. In each instance, this involved a reconception of the Bible in its original context and of the appropriate ways in which it could be made meaningful in the context of the new media culture.

Therefore, in the context of the most significant change in communication technology since the development of literacy in the ancient world, the community of biblical scholarship now faces a massive new task: the reconception and reinterpretation of the Bible in and for digital media and culture. To state this in paradigmatic terms, when our time in history is seen in the context of the megatrends of the Bible and media culture, we need a radically new paradigm of biblical exegesis and interpretation. Therefore, I would propose that the purpose of this group now is the formation of a new paradigm for the exegesis and interpretation of the Bible in the post-literate, digital communication culture of the 21st century. (Having now spent a lifetime in the exploration of various approaches to this task, most of which have been presented in some way to this group, I must confess that I only have clues rather than answers about this new paradigm.)

Some of the clues to that new paradigm may be discerned in the history of the group. The origins of this group were both intensely personal and communal. I began attending SBL in 1976 and became an active participant in both the Structuralism group and the Literary Aspects of the Gospels and Acts group. Both groups were exploring new methodologies for biblical study. In both groups I steadily argued for a need to tell and hear the stories and to reconceive biblical study for the emerging electronic culture. It was not possible in those groups and it became clear that the only way this was going to happen was to establish a new research group.

The first conversations about this group took place in Dallas in 1979, first, as always, with David Rhoads, my roommate at SBL for 20 years, and then with Werner Kelber and Adolf Hansen. With their input and encouragement, I submitted proposals for a consultation in 1980 and 1981, both of which were rejected by the SBL program committee. It was too weird an idea for a group at SBL. At the annual meeting in 1982 in

New York, I talked with Krister Stendahl, who was president of SBL that year, and he encouraged me to try again and promised to help get it through the program committee. I wrote the proposal on a borrowed typewriter in the lobby on the day before the end of the meeting. Krister saw it through the program committee at the end of the meeting and the group was launched. It was a major personal victory in the politics of SBL for which I will always be grateful to Krister Stendahl.

In that first year, 1983, David Rhoads presided. It is not coincidental that David was the chair that day since he has been a part of this group and its most significant contributor since it was first conceived. That first session featured papers by Werner Kelber, James Sanders and me. Werner's paper, titled "Biblical Hermeneutics and the Art of Communication in Antiquity" was a prequel to his book, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* that was published that same year. As you all know, Werner has made a major contribution to biblical research on the intersection of the Bible and communications technology as the just published book in his honor, *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text* reflects. Jim Sanders' paper, "Voice, Vellum, and Vision" was a further development of his writings on the transition from voice to manuscript and the history of the canon. My paper, "The Bible in Oral Tradition and Electronic Media" was an outline of the basic theoretical framework for the group. Though our attendance was good, about fifty people, our request to be established as a group was denied and we were required to have a second year as a consultation.

That second year was one of our best. Walter Brueggemann chaired papers by Martin Marty and Robert Jewett on the Bible in television. In the other session, Walter Ong presented a paper along with my lifelong friend and associate Adam Gilbert Bartholomew and me with a response by Werner Kelber. This was the first session in which we explored the exegesis of a biblical text on the basis of its performance in the ancient world, what David Rhoads is now pursuing as performance criticism. During the presentation of that paper, I told the story of Peter's denial, the first performance of a biblical story in the history of the group and probably in the history of SBL. The rooms were packed for both sessions. Wayne Booth, my college professor from Earlham College, was present at the session as was the founder of this intellectual revolution in theology and biblical study, Walter Ong. It was a historic moment. The pattern was also established that year of a session on the Bible in electronic media and a session on the Bible in oral/manuscript media. With that success in drawing a crowd, the stature of some of the participants along with us newbies, and the immediate prospect of a volume of *Semeia*, we were launched. It took five years from initial proposal to acceptance, perhaps a sign of a paradigm shift.

In retrospect, it is amazing that the group and its multifaceted research agenda was successfully launched. For those first ten years from '79 to '89, we had no steering committee other than my constant conversations with David Rhoads. Each year we had a business meeting at the end of the last session and four or five people would stay and we would brainstorm next steps. But basically I conceived the programs and recruited the participants. The group is amazing because there is a new paradigm of biblical scholarship in a post-literate, digital age implicit in the history of this work that is in

fundamental discontinuity with the historical critical paradigm of the Bible in the document culture of the Enlightenment. And as we know from the past, new paradigms of biblical study do not routinely get fostered by the organizations that defend and extend the paradigms of the past.

The next year, 1985, in Anaheim was of major importance in the history of the group. It marked the first appearance on the program of Joanna Dewey whose paper was entitled, "Oral Methods of Structuring Narrative in Mark." Joanna became the first co-chair of the group a couple years later and has had a major role in the group's life and work throughout its subsequent history. It was also the first appearance of David Barr on the program with a paper on "The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment" which in turn inaugurated new research and development in the Apocalypse of John group that resulted in a performance of the Apocalypse by David Rhoads at the annual meeting in and a major reorientation of scholarship on the Apocalypse. That year was also the occasion of the smallest attendance for a BAMB session ever. The theme was "The Bible in Electronic Media" and Robert Jewett chaired. We first had three papers on the Bible and film, our first session on a topic that has been a frequent theme in the papers of the section. I had recruited a Hollywood writer, Don Hall, and a Hollywood director, Herb Freed, both of whom had been involved in the production of biblical films, to be on a panel. I thought they would be a big draw for biblical scholars. Both of them came at significant personal cost, Herb leaving an actual shoot for the entire morning. The session was scheduled in the annual meeting graveyard, Tuesday morning, in a room that seated at least 250. Three people came for the session and were far outnumbered by the seven presenters at the table in the front. It was hilarious!

The 1986 meeting in Atlanta was still another year of new precedents. The first session was entitled "The Bible as Oral Text" with Robert Jewett presiding. Lou Silbermann of blessed memory (died in 2006) was a major supporter of the group's work in those difficult early years and the editor of our group's first issue of *Semeia* published in 1987 based on the papers from the Chicago session in 1984. He presented a paper entitled "Cantillation as Commentary: Comments on the Reading of Scripture in the Synagogue" with examples of cantillation by Rev. Nahum Berkowitz, who was a cantor at the Anshei Israel Synagogue in Tucson. Another paper was by Nicholas Kastamas from the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology on "Byzantine Liturgical Music and the Sounds of the Gospel." It was another hilarious session for me because of our communal ignorance about chant and our inability to perceive the subtle differences in the different tropes of Hebrew and Byzantine chant. Though we haven't explored it again, this tradition is a living link to the storytelling traditions of the ancient world. I also presented a paper on "Mark as Oral Text: Critical Moments in the Greek Narrative." At the end of this session, David Rhoads performed Mark 1-3:6 and showed a segment of his new video of his performance of the Gospel. This was the first performance of a major section of the Bible in the history of the group and became another frequent feature of the programs of the group.

In 1987 the two sessions addressed the themes of the history of biblical interpretation and the Bible as oral literature. My paper, "Biblical Megatrends: Paradigm Shifts and Media

Change in the History of Biblical Interpretation,” was important for two reasons. The most immediate was that Bernard Brandon Scott responded, was very positive about the paper, and joined the group, and in 1992 became co-chair with Joanna. The paper was later published in a collection of essays edited by Howard Clark Kee, *The Bible in the 21st Century* and this topic was later explored further by Brandon in a full chapter in his book, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories*. The need remains for this correlation between the paradigm shifts of biblical interpretation and changes in communications technology and culture to be comprehensively documented.

The following year, 1988, marked another major development in the history of the group. David Rhoads performed Hans Dieter Betz’s translation of Galatians for over two hundred scholars, the first performance of an entire biblical book at SBL. The serendipity of this session was that it was also the year of a major international colloquium on Galatians in all of the Pauline groups at SBL. While my incomplete scan of Pauline scholarship indicates that it had far less impact on the future of Pauline scholarship than it should, our frequent participant and a respondent to the performance, Robert Jewett, structured his monumental *Hermeneia* commentary on Romans around the assumption that the letter was composed for public reading and needs to be performed and heard in order to be understood. (Richard Ward, ’85, ’87, ’90) Both Bob Jewett and Brandon Scott have combined the publication of substantive work on the Bible and film with works exploring new exegetical approaches to the Pauline letters and Jesus’ parables respectively: i.e., the Bible in ancient and modern media. And, lest we forget, it was David Rhoads who had the wisdom and courage to develop and present this unprecedented performance of Galatians to an international community of biblical scholars. I remember well that it was a scary step to take.

1988 was also the year in which memory research was formally introduced to the deliberations of the group. Arno Hutchison’s paper, “Memory Research, Memorized Manuscripts, and the Synoptic Tradition,” also introduced the proposal that the memorization of manuscripts was a major factor in the Synoptic tradition’s transition from orality to literacy. The memorization of manuscripts was the basic pedagogy of ancient education, both Greco-Roman and rabbinic. That central process in the ancient world has not been taken seriously in the attempts to account for the word-for-word identity of much of the Synoptics. It was also the first appearance on the program of Robert Fowler who has made a significant contribution to the group’s work as co-chair and as a presenter. His paper, “Post-Modern Biblical Criticism: The Criticism of Pre-Modern Texts in a Post-Critical, Post-Modern, Post-Literate Era” was another step in the formation of a coherent new paradigm for biblical scholarship in this new age.

In 1989 the modern media session of the group was still another precedent for future developments: the presentation of a video of a performance of segments of the Gospel of Luke by Leonardo Defilipus. Alec McGowen was the first Shakespearean actor to perform a Gospel. I saw his production in New York in 1971, two years after I had begun performing major sections of Mark’s Gospel in church coffee houses around New York. Defilipus built on McGowen’s model as have many other performers since, the most important being David Rhoads. These theatrical performances have introduced the

persistent question of the relationship between storytelling and drama as performance traditions, a question we would do well to address directly at some point in the future. And for the record my position is that storytelling was the most important performance art of the biblical tradition and it is a fundamentally different performance art than drama. The biblical storytelling tradition from beginning to end practiced the art of storytelling in which the storyteller tells the story directly to the audience and presents all of the characters of the story. The second session that year entitled Pauline acoustics featured, I have been surprised to discover, the only paper Art Dewey has ever done in this section, he having been a frequent presider almost every year in the 18 years since. It was also the last of three papers on Pauline performance by Richard Ward.

In 1990, Brandon Scott and Robert Jewett each gave papers on Paul and Narrative Films, Brandon on Romans 8 and Dirty Harry and Bob on Romans 12:3 and the Empire of the Sun. Both papers were chapters of soon to be published books and demonstrated the importance of structuralism for biblical criticism of film. The other session was the first effort to focus on differing performances of one story, the Syro-Phoenician woman.

The only session of the group in 1991 was a revisiting of the issues raised by Werner Kelber's, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*. This was the first session in which we

The last year on which I want to comment specifically was 1992 and the screening and evaluation of "Out of the Tombs." Sponsored jointly by the Structuralism group and BAAM, we had the largest attendance for that session in the history of the group, over 300 people. "Out of the Tombs" was the first production of the American Bible Society's Multimedia Translation Project for which I had been the Chief Consultant since 1988. It was an opportunity to explore and implement the new hermeneutical framework that had emerged in this group. And several people from this group were involved in the project. The theory was that the experiential impact of a biblical story in its original context could be identified by a group exploration of a story for the audience of an ancient performance. This exegesis also involved an effort to identify the images of the story that were evoked by the performance in the minds of the audience. This exploration would involve a team of biblical scholars and producers, writers, and directors. After this careful communal exegetical work, the team would have both a conceptual understanding and an experiential sense of the dynamics of the story which could then be translated into the languages of digital image and sound. The translation would be a dynamic equivalent rendering of the story in the languages of digital media.

The theory was in its infancy in 1992 and the project was very fragile because the producers were not sure that it was possible to be effective with a biblical scholar as co-director. In retrospect, my decision to invite the producer and director of the film to the session was a mistake. They were not treated graciously as our guests and the session only confirmed their doubts about biblical scholarship. Accounts of what happened in the session vary. Much of the critique was savage. While some of the respondents sought to identify in a constructive manner the strengths and weaknesses of this new effort, some of the critics sought to destroy it. This was biblical criticism in all its diversity and craziness. And in the end the destruction succeeded. The project never recovered from

the loss of energy that happened on that day. And three months later, when the director of the project refused to allow me to organize the joint workshop of the scholars and producers on the next story we were going to translate, I resigned from the project. It was my conviction that without extensive exploration of the story with experiential exegetical methods by both scholars and producers, what we would now call performance criticism, the project would flounder. The project was terminated in the late '90's by a new administration at ABS that no longer had the budget of the '90's to spend and did not understand the project. They have buried the films and interactive computer programs that were produced and it is now virtually impossible to get them. In the end ABS was unable to transcend its origins as an institution formed in the paradigm of the Bible in print culture. It is an open question whether the same is true of SBL.

In subsequent fifteen years of the group, we have continued to sponsor critical scholarship on the character of the transition from orality to literacy in the ancient world and in the formation of the Bible, performances of particular biblical compositions such as the Gospel of John, the Apocalypse of John, Mark and the Bible in film, digital text, and images. We have taken significant steps in the formation of new methods for the study of biblical compositions in their original media context. Brandon Scott and Margaret Lee have made two presentations to the group on sound mapping, a new methodology for the establishment of the actual sounds of the Bible. David Rhoads and his students have both proposed and demonstrated the results of performance criticism as a comprehensive methodology for biblical scholarship in this new paradigm.

Another dimension of our work in the Bible in both ancient media has been the establishment of new partnerships with other groups in SBL and, through John Miles Foley, with the oral tradition research community. This has included a partnership since 2004 of members of this group with the Network of Biblical Storytellers at their annual Festival Gatherings which was an outgrowth of a session in 2002 entitled "Biblical Storytelling: Critical Reflections." We have also established partnerships with other SBL groups in the exploration of the Bible in modern media. In 1996 we had a joint session with the Semiotics and Exegesis Section and the Computer Assisted Research Group on the Bible as Electronic Text and in 2004 a great session with the Johannine Literature Section on "The Gospel of John" film produced by Visual Bible International and Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ." In these years a number of younger scholars have made major contributions to the work of the group including Richard Swanson and Holly Hearon who have both made major contributions to the field and are currently the co-chairs of our section, Tom Thatcher who has just published a book of essays on marking the 25th anniversary of Werner's work, James Maxey, and Philip Ruge-Jones. The success of the group is evident as well in the large number of scholars who have presented individual papers in our new role since 2000 as a section.

With the establishment of performance criticism as a viable critical methodology, the group is at a new stage of its work in forming a new paradigm for biblical scholarship in digital culture. It is of vital importance that we recognize that performance criticism is not simply another methodological arrow in the quiver of historical criticism to be used along with source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, narrative criticism,

structuralist criticism, etc. It is a major candidate in the field's election of a new paradigm for the digital future. Historical criticism and its quiver of methods is based on the philosophical foundations of what Hans Frei calls "meaning as reference," the study of biblical texts as documents in order to identify the historical and theological data within them. This paradigm is conceived within the framework of the media culture of the Enlightenment and the communication system of the silent reading of mass printed texts. This is the governing paradigm of theological education, as it has been since the first formation of American Protestant seminaries to teach historical criticism as a constructive methodology for the interpretation of the Bible in the Church in the late 18th century. It is also the basis of the paradigm of the objective, non-partisan teaching of the Bible in colleges and universities.

This paradigm of biblical interpretation is based on the assumption that ancient biblical texts were edited and read in silence by readers who were searching the texts for their theological and historical meaning as we do. If that assumption is false as I believe it is, the entire paradigm is invalid. This is I think the underlying reason for the truth of Walter Wink's statement, "Historical criticism is bankrupt." Because of this assumption, historical criticism in its present form is unable to generate meaning of value to a post-literate, digital culture that values experiential, dynamic meaning. Performance criticism is the foundation of a new paradigm of biblical scholarship. Its foundational assumption is that the Bible was composed as a series of performance experiences for audiences in the ancient world, not as a set of books as we think of books.

If this is true, an entire new exegesis of the compositions of the Bible is needed. Performance criticism needs to be developed as a new center of exegetical focus around which the various methods of traditional exegesis can be reorganized. When the compositions of the Bible are analyzed and interpreted as scores performed by speakers for audiences, there are very significant differences in meaning from traditional exegesis that become clear. For example, the recognition that biblical storytellers presented the speeches of major characters such as Moses and Jesus as those characters speaking to their audiences as the characters who are addressed in the stories profoundly changes our perceptions of biblical audiences. The audiences of the Gospels, for example, were never addressed as Gentile members of Christian congregations. The audiences of the Gospels are always addressed as various groups of Jews such as the Pharisees, the crowd, the Jews who believed in him, the Jews who were seeking to kill him, and the disciples. Whatever the identity of the audiences was in actuality, they were addressed as Jews. However, this data is evaluated, it profoundly changes the perception of the meaning of the Gospels in their original context.

This new exegesis will in turn provide a new foundation for interpretations of the Bible in television, film, and liturgical performance. Rather than the meaning of the stories being located in theological truths that need to be communicated in some manner, the meaning of the stories is located in the dynamics of relationship and interaction.

A next step is then to reconceive the way in which introduction to the Bible is taught. If the Bible is a series of compositions for performance to audiences, students need to be

introduced to the process of learning Scripture from memory and performing it. At present, introduction is conceived in the paradigm of the Enlightenment. Introduction has been a baptism in the study of biblical texts as documents. It has been an introduction to the documentary hypothesis, the Synoptic problem, and the discovery of historical and theological meaning through critical, textual study. This process is continued in local churches in the disembodied, objective reading of the texts in a detached voice. The new paradigm suggests that in a digital culture the Scriptures need to be performed by heart and that the goal is to present the dynamics and impact of the Scripture both in its original context and in the life of the community now. That is, in theological education, in college education as well as in the churches, the pedagogical and liturgical methods of biblical education and liturgical performance need to be changed. Bringing about that change might be one of the areas of research and development that this group would address in the future. Memory research, performance criticism commentaries of the books of the Bible including audio and video recordings, the media history of biblical interpretation, new modes of performance, new videos, the integration of images in biblical interpretation—these are some of the dimensions of the ongoing reinterpretation of the Bible in ancient and modern media.

Thank you for the joy and adventure of being a part of this community.