Breathing Life into the Word: Towards an anthropology of reading in the early church

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Probably the least controversial way I can begin this paper is by stating that the place of Scripture within the early church was pretty central. Paul’s letters, our earliest Christian writings, frequently refer to the Hebrew Scriptures in order to substantiate and explain his thought and teaching.

The author of 1 Timothy 4.13 instructs its reader (a church leader) to “attend to the reading (πρόσεξε τῇ ἀναγνώσει)”. The assumption here is generally made that this instruction refers to a liturgical function; the public reading within the church setting.

As a point of interest, to demonstrate just how deeply ingrained this assumption is, various translations of this verse include:

- Give attendance to reading – Authorised Version
- Give attendance to the public reading of scripture – New Revised Standard Version
- Devote your attention to the public reading of the scriptures – New English Bible
- Devote yourself to the public reading of scripture – New International Version
- Be sure to keep on reading the Scriptures in worship – Contemporary English Version
- read and explain the Scriptures to the church – The Living Bible


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This is not shown to throw doubt upon the appropriateness of these translations, but to illustrate how closely associated, in our minds, is the use of the Bible with its public or liturgical setting.

Nevertheless, what exactly is being read is not stated. At this time, there was no word for ‘scripture’ in either Greek or Hebrew and so references to what would later become biblical texts are simply referred to with the generic ‘the writing’ (ἡ γραφή), ‘the writings’ (αἱ γραφαί) and, more obliquely, by the phrase, ‘it is written’ (γέγραπται). The term ‘Gospel’ (εὐαγγέλιον) relating to the written text appears to have been adopted early in the second century appearing in Ignatius² and the Didache³ (although at times it is difficult to determine if it is referring to a written text or the message of the church).⁴

Things become clearer a little later, when around 156 C.E.⁵, Justin Martyr provides us with a more detailed description of the devotional practice in the second century church. He states that:

> On the day which is called the day of the sun there is an assembly of all those who live in the towns or in the country when they gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles⁶ or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time permits. Then the reader ceases, and the president speaks, admonishing and exhorting us to imitate these good things.

_Apol. 1.67_

Justin was familiar with the liturgical and devotional practices of the Christian communities in both Rome and Asia Minor and his description may therefore be taken as being fairly typical of these

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² Ignatius _Phild_ 8.2
³ _Didache_ 15.3.
⁴ For an overview of the nomenclature used to refer to sacred texts in the early church, see: Baird, J.A. 2002:186-208.
⁵ For dating, see Robert Grant’s _ABD_ article: Grant, R. 1992:1133.
⁶ ἀπομνημονεύματα τῶν ἀποστόλων.
The ordering of Gospels (memoirs) and then the ‘writings of the prophets’ might be indicative of a sequence in the readings with the ‘Old Testament’ being read (optionally) second. Nevertheless, as Markschies notes, this passage suggests that early Christian worship had a “fixed order of reading (perhaps a continuous reading in sections, as in the synagogue).” Markschies’ observation of a possible continuity with early Christian liturgical practice (particularly in relation to the reading of Scripture) and wider Jewish customs is significant.

We know that the reading of the Hebrew texts formed a central position within the pluriform expression of Jewish faith within second Temple era, Judaism.

At least, three of the four main Jewish philosophies or sects described by Josephus in his Jewish Antiquities (Ant 18.1.2-4) – Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes – place a major focus upon the reading of the scriptures. It should therefore be not surprising that the early followers of Jesus reflected this attitude to texts and the way that they were used.

But WHY? What was so special about the reading of these texts? How were they approached? How were they handled? What was expected from their reading? What was so important about the way that they functioned within their respective communities that led their members to become so closely identified with them that they can later be described as ‘people of the book’?

A short examination of the Decalogue (ten commandments) may be helpful.

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7 Gamble suggests that the practices described by Justin were probably universal among the Christian communities: Gamble, HY. 1995:151 and 205.
8 It is not by any means certain that writings of the prophets refer to the ‘Old Testament’, Baird suggests that it could refer to a “written tradition, giving to the Christian prophets a literary role.” However, in the absence of any compelling evidence, I side with Gamble as the prophetic role of the ‘Old Testament’ is in accord with his approach. See: Baird, J. A. 2002:194.
10 For an overview of the place of reading within these groups, see: Horsely, R.A. 2008:52ff. For a more detailed examination of Jewish attitudes and use of texts in the second temple period, see: Jaffe, M. 2001.
It must first be noted that issues of historical fact, as to whether the Ten Commandments were actually brought down from Mount Sinai by Moses and subsequently kept in the Ark of the Covenant, need not concern this discussion. What is salient is the importance of the concept of the Decalogue within early Judaism and how that concept might be able to throw light upon attitudes to (and the function of) written texts. It must also be stressed that the example of the Decalogue does not demonstrate the only way written texts might have functioned within ancient Judaism. However, it is precisely its archaic nature (or its apparent archaic nature; possibly its retrojection of contemporary attitudes and perceptions back onto the retelling of ancient history) that it can have such a profoundly significant influence upon Jewish and later early Christian consciousness that will be explored.

One of the most immediate and central questions is, if one accepts that ancient Israelite society (in its apparent bronze-age setting) was principally pre-literate – or at the very most, proto-literate – why were the Ten Commandments committed to writing? Both the Exodus and Deuteronomic accounts refer to the fact that the Law and the Covenant were expected to be disseminated orally.\(^\text{11}\) In the light of this, the fact that specific emphasis is made that it was committed to written form might offer some valuable clues concerning the place of written texts within early Judaism.

**Who wrote the Ten Commandments?**

Although sounding like a trick Sunday School question, unravelling the ‘facts’ concerning who inscribed the tablets of stone is fraught with difficulties. The Sinai event is recounted in a number of different forms. This makes deciding who wrote on which tablets and precisely what was written on

\(^{11}\) Particularly Exodus. 24.3 and 34.32ff. The main section of Deuteronomy takes the form of an oral discourse.
them difficult to discover. However, such reworking/revision of the Decalogue account is, in itself, suggestive in that there was felt to be a need to frequently revisit and reinterpret the story.

Friedman identifies Exodus 34 as the earliest layer of Sinai account – belonging to Non-P History (Friedman attributes it to the Yahwist, J). This version describes Yahweh instructing Moses to inscribe (write) upon the stone tablets the “words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments” (Ex 34.28).  

However, Friedman argues that later writers/editors then moved this section until after the primary Sinai event. They then replaced it with an account of Yahweh inscribing the stone tablets (Ex 31.18 and 32.15). These divinely inscribed tablets were then subsequently broken when Moses returned to the camp. The earlier account was then repositioned to describe the writing by Moses of the replacement tablets.  

If this reconstruction is correct, what appears to be foregrounded more in the later accounts is the divine origin of this writing.  

In other words, the texts are reflecting a tradition in which the inscription (writing) event becomes increasingly imbued with the qualities of divine intervention. The ‘original’ story describes Moses, under the direction of Yahweh, chiselling out Yahweh’s dictated words onto the stone tablets. In

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12 Yahweh first of all instructs Moses to cut two stone tablets (34.1a). The reference to ‘like the former ones’ and to the tablets that had been broken was added to explain the second writing. Friedman, R. E. 1999:132, 134.  

13 See also Dozeman’s discussion of this pp 739-749 (partic. 749): Dozeman, T.B. 2009.  

14 It is perhaps significant that Deuteronomist appears to also emphasise that this second set of tablets was also divinely written (34.1b). He has Moses saying to the people that the Lord had told him to carve out two tablets and that he (God) “will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets.” Moses then describes how he followed the Lord’s instructions and God “wrote on the tablets” (Deut 10.2-4).
later retellings, the divine agency comes increasingly to the fore, resulting in the finger of Yahweh directly inscribing the stones.

Later traditions push this trend even further and present the words themselves as exhibiting supernatural characteristics. Pseudo-Philo describes the letters vanishing from the tablets when Moses sees the golden calf.\(^{15}\) Rabbi Nathan and the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan write that the letters “flew away” to return to the heavens.\(^{16}\) These much later interpretations are probable attempts to explain Moses’ apparent blasphemous act in destroying God’s handiwork.\(^{17}\)

**But what is important is that as the tradition about the Decalogue develops, it reflects an increasingly close association between the writing and Yahweh’s participation in their creation.**

Such appeals to the divine, as an authorisation, are consonant with both Jewish and Greek experience. We see a similar tendency explaining the production of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures; the Septuagint. Aristeas describes the translation process and its associated rituals. He appears to be concerned to stress the quality of the translators and the accuracy of their work.\(^{18}\) Apart from blessing the proceedings, the only hint that Aristeas gives concerning divine intervention is the ‘coincidence’ that the work was completed in seventy-two days which was the same number of translators involved.\(^{19}\) Broadly mirroring Aristeas, Josephus’ account emphasises the painstakingly hard work undertaken by those involved.\(^{20}\)


\(^{17}\) In his *Dictionary of Judaica*, Cohn-Sherbok describes the order of events as: Moses first wrote them and then on returning to the camp he broke the tablets. These were then replaced by a second inscribed set of tablets. Cohn-Sherbok, D. 1992:536. Childs argues that Yahweh writes the Decalogue and Moses is commissioned to write the Law: Childs, B. M. 1979:133-135.


\(^{19}\) “ὁστε ἐν ἡμέραις ἐργομένου ταῖς τῆς μεταγραφῆς, ὀίονει κατὰ πρόθεσιν τινα ὁμοίου τοιούτου γεγενημένου.” Aristeas. *Arist*. 307b.

However, Philo (De Vita Mosis. 2.37d) downplays this human aspect by stressing that:

[The translators] became as it were possessed, and, under inspiration, wrote, not each several scribe something different, but the same word for word, as though dictated to each by an invisible prompter.\(^{21}\)

Both Aristeas (with Josephus) and Philo are employing strategies for ‘validating’ (or according authority) to a written text. However, Philo appeals to divine intervention, rather than human acumen as the mark of authority. He also emphasises the divine origin of the Law by referring to it as being given by the voice of God (\(\text{θεσπισθέντας} \\ \text{Θεόν \ ἔν τινας}\)).\(^{22}\)

Such an appeal to divine agency is perhaps not surprising for texts that are essentially religious. We do not have time to show how the identification with Yahweh and written texts becomes increasingly important within Judaism as those texts take on an increasingly central role within the nation. Nevertheless, these strategies for authenticating certain written texts are also employed by the early church, as they too encounter similar socio-cultural and religious pressures. This suggests that there is an apparent development from perceiving the written text in a relatively non-supernatural way (Moses copying down the dictated laws) to one that attributes a high degree of divine participation in its creation and/or authorship. However, such a simple linear movement usually belies social actuality and should be treated with caution.\(^{23}\)

**Although I am arguing for this progression, what I am trying to say that it was not that simple!**

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\(^{21}\) Translation by F. Colson. 1959:465.

\(^{22}\) Philo. Mosis. 2.34

\(^{23}\) It is not that I don’t think such a thing is happening, but that such a position does not allow for synchronic differences or that the reasons behind such moves are more complex than simply a group of people becoming more ‘extravagant’ in their claims about their written texts.
However, appeals to the divine are also reflected within Classical Greece. Rosalind Thomas observes that even in the late Classical period legal inscriptions were overtly associated with a divine guardian. Many of the monumental inscriptions were placed near, or actually on, Temple walls. These inscriptions often contained a warning that defacing the monument would incur the wrath of a deity.

What is particularly significant is that, generally, these statutes were not the established social codes of that city, but new and perhaps controversial rules. In other words, the use of inscription and an explicit appeal to divine protection was a political strategy to gain the law’s acceptance and therefore gain compliance by the population.

Such a similar close association between the written text and the divine appears to have been central to the perception of the Decalogue. Undoubtedly, the individual nature of the Jewish context informed such a cultic association, but appeals to a ‘higher’ authority for the validation of certain laws could also indicate particular political interests and concerns – as is reflected in both Deuteronomistic and Priestly writings.

However, this does not address the central issue of why the Decalogue was written rather than transmitted orally. We have already noted that both the Exodus and the Deuteronomistic accounts refer to presence of oral systems of teaching. This suggests that there appears to have been a more than adequate and effective social structure for the purely oral dissemination and explication of the law.

24 Although, this study has specifically limited its focus to the Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures, this practice appears to reflect a more general association between written law codes and the divine. For example, the prologue and epilogue of the Laws of Hammurabi (1904) repeatedly draws attention to the close relationship between Hammurabi and the divine figures.
26 See footnote 11.
In neighbouring cultures, an oral law code shared by the population appears to have been the norm, with only newer statues being committed to writing in the form of public inscriptions.\(^{27}\) So idea that the Ten Commandments were inscribed into stone so that future generations could come along and learn them is, therefore, deeply unsatisfactory.

What I am trying to show here is that, what is being expressed by the tablets of stone seems to be more than an exercise in simply ‘getting the thing down in writing’. If the objective was to preserve the sacred text, word for word (in a graphocentric manner), it was spectacularly unsuccessful; compare Exodus 20.2-17 with Deuteronomy 5.1-22.\(^{28}\)

Such variations in wording are significant. Of all the six hundred and thirteen commands and statutes believed to have been given to Moses on Mt Sinai, the Ten Commandments, being brief and (broadly) formulaic, are the ones most eminently suitable for oral transmission.\(^{29}\) However, they are the ones that are committed to writing and, despite this, they are textually (both in wording and word order) very insecure.\(^{30}\)

Therefore, in actuality, the stone tablets appeared to have functioned in a distinctly non-literary way.

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\(^{27}\) Discussing the Greek Polis, Thomas argues that normative law codes would have become endemic among the population base from its pre-literate phases: Thomas, R. 1992:145ff.


\(^{29}\) Kugel refers to a Jewish tradition which claims that Moses received 613 commandments: Kugel, J. L. 1997:378; 380.

There are a number of possible reasons for this. For example, in contrast to today, where written publication can be seen as a democratic act, in a pre or early literate society writing effectively restricts the access of a text to an élite group who can then act as gatekeepers, controlling its transmission, dissemination and interpretation (we see this with the increasing importance placed upon the role of scribe/grammateus). However I want to focus here on written text as metonymy and its significance.

In a culture which assumes that the ‘natural’ medium for writing is paper, there can be a tendency to overlook the significance of inscriptions on stone.\(^{31}\) To the modern mind, the durability of the material naturally suggests that the monument or tablet is a physical metaphor for the ‘immutability’ of that which is inscribed upon it. However, within the ancient world there appears to be a far richer complex of associations. It has been argued that the first attempts to write involved scratching marks on a rock.\(^{32}\) What is important to note is that it was often the rocks themselves (or their locations) that held the social and religious significance which in turn gave rise to the epigraphy.\(^{33}\) In this respect, it was primarily the rocks that carried the meaning.

Stones and pillars were erected as markers of events or agreements. They are visual reminders. As Rosalind Thomas observes, the advent of writing does little to change the overall impact and

\(^{31}\) Thomas makes the important point that, although most publications give the dimensions of an inscription, it is easy to ignore their physical appearance (height and width), thus missing valuable information. Thomas, R. 1992:84.


\(^{33}\) One example can be found in David Craig’s discussion of Uluru in Australia: Craig, D. 1995:102-111 (particularly 105). This is a good example of Thomas’s argument that early writing practices were developed in pre-existing non-literate ways.
function of the marker. In fact, the inscriptions seem to add very little information. In the case of debt markers, the location of the stone will be enough to remind the community of its message. The stone IS the message; the written word simply enforces its existing function. Consequently, we need to understand the Decalogue in terms of how such inscriptions were seen to operate.

In some respects, the tablets of stone resemble monumental inscriptions within the wider ancient world. They represented authority.

Primarily, the tribute lists and decrees erected in conquered territories were not there to inform, but to intimidate and impress.

**The message is therefore more than what has been written**

Thomas notes that many legal inscriptions in Classical Greece were obscure. Their ambiguous wording and the stylised ornamental writing, punctuation and peculiar word division suggested their main purpose was effect rather than legibility (see Boustrophedon inscriptions). This suggests that often these highly ornate inscriptions point to the intent of public “mystification”, rather than clarity. In other words, the public were not expected to read the wording, their purpose was to inspire and impress or simply intimidate. They also provided a social function, in that they

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35 “The main two points which emerge here are first that the written element is inseparable from the non-written (the stone, tomb, witnesses); and secondly that the use and function of the written element are influences by the earlier (non-written) custom and continuation of the oral methods of memorial and proof.” Thomas, R. 1992:90 also relevant are pp 4 and 84.


symbolised a political or legal structure and, through lists of traitors and heroes, conveyed a sense of identity in defining, protecting and confirming social values.\(^{39}\)

It is possible to see the Decalogue functioning in a similar way. It acts as a metonymy for YHWH and is, consequently, a symbol of his authority within the nation. Its importance to national identity can be seen in the way it was always located at the heart of the community, placed within the Ark of the Covenant. Socially and politically, in a nation that was (intended) to have no king, such a physical symbol of authority and social cohesion was of vital importance. The rocks of the tablets (presumably from Sinai itself) presented a clear symbol of the events which happened there, pertaining to kingship, and Covenant.

In other words, what must be emphasised here is the significance and importance of the written text as a physical entity. This is central to understanding how ancient societies initially perceived the purpose of writing; whether as inscriptions scratched onto drinking vessels, funerary stelae, or huge tribute monuments. Writing simply *added* to the existing symbolic function. Rosalind Thomas offers an excellent description of such an orally-minded approach to the written form:

> The main two points which emerge here are, first that the written element is inseparable from the non-written (the stone, tomb or witness); and secondly that the use and function of the written element are influenced by the earlier (non-written) custom and the continuation of the oral methods of memorial and proof.\(^{40}\)

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\(^{39}\) Thomas, R. 1992:139. For the importance of inscriptions in maintaining the concept of kle/oj (fame) within the ancient Greek world see: Svenbro, J. 1993: Chapters 1 and 5.

\(^{40}\) Thomas, R. 1992:90.
Early inscriptions tended to be in the first person. The funerary σῆμα [seema] of Phrasikleia (dated around 540 BCE) declares:

σῆμα Φρασικλείας κούρη κεκλήσομαι αἰεί, ἀντὶ γάμου παρὰ θεῶν τούτο λαχουσ’ ὄνομα.

I, Phrasikleia’s sêma [seema], shall always be called girl, having received this name from the gods instead of marriage.

An example of an even earlier inscription is the eighth century BCE bronze statuette which is inscribed: “Mantiklos dedicated me.” This tendency is instructive concerning early-literate (as opposed to pre-literate) approaches to writing and, particularly, reading. It has been argued that such a characteristic is suggestive of an animist or ‘vitalist’ function which endows the inscribed object with speech. Svenbro dismisses such claims as “indemonstrable and at odds with the facts” as the Greeks were aware that it is the reader, rather than the written inscription (except in a metaphorical sense), that speaks.

A more satisfactory explanation for the use of the first person is the way that it bridges the gap between the speech-act of composition and the speech-act of reading. If my reading of Svenbro is correct, he argues that the use of ‘I’ (ego) brings the quality of Hierheit (or ‘hereness’) to the text.

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43 Svenbro, J. 1993:30
44 It must be noted that the first two commands of the Decalogue are expressed in the first person singular (Ex. 20.2-6) with the remaining commands taking the third person singular. For various discussions of this switch within the Jewish tradition see: Kugel, J. L. 1997:376-377.
After the inscription is made, the writer is “no longer here” and consequently becomes the third person; the one that is beyond or “over there”. The object – Phrasicleia’s statue - now takes the first person and effectively bridges (Hierheit) that temporal and/or spatial distance so that the reader actually participates again in the original speech event which created that inscription. One must remember here that writing was generally composed from dictation. In other words, the object, because of the form of its inscription, is a continuing and tangible presence of the temporal and ethereal speech act.

If Svenbro is correct, this presents an interesting way of understanding the relationship between speech, hearing and writing. A written text is dependent upon finding a voice, for without such a voice it remains incomplete; literally voiceless. The text, in this sense, remains a string of meaningless, unintelligible and dead letters. It can only be accessed when the γράμματα finds their voice in that of the reader. In order for this to happen, the reader must become subservient to the text. The reader’s voice (the sonorous aspect) no longer belongs to him (and it probably would be a him), but is relinquished to the text. The reading event is thus described by Svenbro:

At the moment of reading, the reader relinquishes his voice to what is written and to the absent writer. That means his voice is not his own as he reads. While it is employed to bring the dead letters to life, it belongs to what is written.

What Svenbro is describing is an interchange of power between the written text and the reader. Initially, because the writer is absent, the text is powerless (or dead). As the majority cannot read,
the writing is unintelligible. However, the voice of the reader is relinquished so that the dead letters may become a *viva vox*. In so doing, the initial position of power enjoyed by the reader is appropriated by the text. To describe this, Svenbro provocatively uses the Greek image of pederasty, where the written text takes the active part of the ἐραστής (lover) while the reader takes the part of its passive partner ἐρωμένος (beloved).

One of the earliest uses of writing was on funerary objects. Consequently, writing appears to have been set in an early association with the spatial and temporal distance caused by death. The author (or implied author), being dead, is no longer physically present. Svenbro demonstrates that memorial stelae functioned, not simply as markers of remembrance, but actively participated in the continuation of an individual’s earthly presence and, particularly their κλέος (renown). Writing had a dynamic character which was unlocked, or given life to, by the reader’s voice. In other words, writing was not primarily undertaken to passively record data for future posterity. As already noted, as records of ‘historical’ fact, such written texts often offer frustratingly little information.

Their function lies in the effect caused by the vocalisation of the ‘dead’ letters – the content of which was often already known. A text was written in order that its beneficence (or in the case of curses, malignancy) should be perpetuated, even in the author’s bodily absence.

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52 As inscriptions tended to be written *scriptio continua* and with no punctuation, the reader would also be ignorant to the text. Only as the words were ‘sounded out’ one at a time would realisation come. Svenbro points out the etymological association of ‘recognition’ with α0na/gnwsij : Svenbro, J. 1993:18.


57 How this operates with written curses see: Thomas, R. 1992:80-82.
Florence Dupont describes this process as “writing sandwiched between two voices”, in which writing acts as a conduit through which the breath carrying the voice can travel. In this sense reading becomes the means of “transition between two oralities.” Applying this to the use of the Sibylline Books, Dupont rejects Svenbro’s reader in the role of the passive ἐρωμένος, arguing that s/he has power of the written text using it for oral recomposition. The reading event is essentially a unique oral event. In this way, Dupont pushes Svenbro’s model to creative extremes. The reader creates an event that has never before been ‘oralised’. However, she does not elaborate as to just how creative the reader could be with the written text. Conceivably, it could depend upon the type of text that is being ‘re-oralised’. Nevertheless, Svenbro and Dupont are both describing an active and dynamic (geographical and temporal) bridge through which the initial creative event is (re-)played in front of a new audience.

The significance of this is that it is not just the breath of the reader that is ‘used’ by the text, but that the reader themselves participates creatively in the re-playing of this initial oral/aural encounter. In this way, both past and present elide (merge) in the reader.

Consequently, written texts function polyvalently. Their physical presence enforces the quality of ‘hereness’ (Hierheit) of the message despite authorial absence. This absence is bridged when future readers lend to the written text their own voices as a substitute for that of the author’s. However, we should also note an interesting paradox occurring here. There is a sense in which the written

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60 “The writing does not serve to fix an oral performance in order to preserve the statement it makes; instead, it is used to recompose a new oral performance on the basis of that statement, which in effect implies the creation of a new statement, never before oralized.”: Dupont, F. 1999:221.
form presents the brute fact of separation (geographically or temporally); that is why it is there. To borrow from Dupont, the ‘us’ of the oral event is separated into the ‘you’ (here) and the ‘i’ [author] (there). In other words, it is a memorial to a ruptured relationship. However, that relationship is healed through the text being voiced.

Consequently, the written form emphasises distance, while at the same time is the means of (re-) establishing that relationship. If we are to apply this to the Decalogue, the tablets physically denote divine alterity and separateness, whilst also functioning as a means through which the ‘i’ of the author and the ‘you’ of the hearer’ can once more be ‘us’. Rather than passively transmitting information, the message itself is perceived as active with a predefined purpose.

Svenbro uses the example of a magistrate orally reproducing the law to the city. He describes this process as metempsychosis. A magistrate reciting a law does not own or control the law, he is simply lending it his breath/life. In this way, the person reciting (and in later times, reading) the text is purely the servant who allows the text to inhabit them. In this case, it would be more accurate to call it metensomatosis. The law is embodied within the reader and, consequently, in a very real sense, it has a ‘living voice’. This is essential to our understanding of the function of reading within ancient societies. It explains the centrality and importance of the viva vox to a text, whether it is written or transmitted by word of mouth. To orally recite a text is to ‘allow’ that text to utilise the reciter’s vocal chords; the ‘living voice’ of the law is heard because it uses the lips of the magistrate.

The ‘voice’ of the inscription is given life as the reader articulates the sounds of the letters.

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61 Dupont, F. 1999:118.
63 “Through metensomatosis, this nomos would become embodied in the persons of the city magistrates, its “slaves,” or even in the citizens in general. That is, nomos would inhabit them, choosing now one, now another as its vocal instrument, for even if nomos did not have a body of its own, its voice had to manifest itself as a real, sonorous, audible voice, not a metaphorical one.” Svenbro, J. 1993:160.
We begin to see here why reading was so important within the early church (as with other expressions of faith at that time). Reading – right reading – was crucial in the process of hearing God. Hence the office of reader (lector) quickly developed within the formative church; a position attained only through the meeting of strict religious and ethical requirements.\(^\text{64}\) It was the reader’s task to locate and literally to give breath to the “living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).\(^\text{65}\) It was the kerygma (proclamation) of these living words\(^\text{66}\) and its attendant auditory reception (ἀκούειν) which was so vital to the believers and which the early church viewed as its raison d’être.\(^\text{67}\)

Consequently, the aural impact of the reading of the scriptural text (particularly within the ritual frame of the liturgical context) was to effectively forms a ‘sacred space’ wherein the believer can enter to encounter the divine.\(^\text{68}\) A tripartite relationship is, therefore, occurring between (i) the community, (ii) the text (written/oral) and (iii) the author/God. The text is not simply the mediating agency, but is an active element which creates a ‘sacred space’ in which humanity can encounter God. The rupture between the community and the now absent leader (or God) is healed as the oral event (whether in the form of teaching, proclaiming or – as in the case of the epistles – dictating) is once again recreated.

The fibres of papyrus manuscript, like P66, were not primarily concerned with the conveyance of mere lexical or syntactic data, nor for that matter just informational or semantic content, or even to

\(^\text{65}\) See also Heb 4.12.
\(^\text{66}\) Codex Vaticanus and some citations by Jerome read ἐναργὴς (visible, bright) for ἐνεργὴς, Heb 4.12. NA 27 1 Peter 1.23, lists a large number of witnesses which add εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα(ς) to μένοντος, no doubt to reflect v25.
\(^\text{67}\) Romans 10.17
\(^\text{68}\) This is not to presuppose that such a space cannot be created through visual impact, within the individual, by the (private) reading.
ensure that these words were not forgotten, but they were to carry the ‘living words’ that were the heart of Christian faith.

References


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