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Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies? 'Orality', 'Performance' and Reading Texts in Early Christianity*

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In recent decades, emphasising the 'orality/aurality' of the Roman world, some scholars have asserted that in early Christian circles texts were 'performed', not 'read' (and could not have been read), likening this action to descriptions of oratorical delivery of speeches (from memory) or theatrical performance. It has even been suggested that some texts, particularly the Gospel of Mark, were composed in 'performance', and not through an author working up a text in written form. These claims seem to be based on numerous oversimplifications (and so distortions) of relevant historical matters, however, and also involve a failure to take account of the full range of relevant data about the use of texts in early Christianity and the wider Roman-era setting. So, at least some of the crucial claims and inferences made are highly dubious. In this essay, I offer corrections to some crucial oversimplifications, and I point to the sorts of data that must be taken into account in drawing a more reliable picture of the place of texts and how they functioned in early Christianity.

Keywords: oral performance, performance criticism, orality, Christian readers, Roman literacy, manuscripts, literary rolls, codex, graffiti, popular literacy, dictation

Over the last few decades a small but increasing number of scholars have postulated that in early Christian circles texts such as those that make up the New Testament were originally 'performed', by which they appear to mean something more than skilful reading, something more akin to ancient oratorical delivery and/or theatrical performances, involving (it is proposed) recitation of the texts from memory (not reading from a manuscript), animated or theatrical use of voice and bodily gestures/actions, and even various lively responses from the

* I thank Scott Charlesworth, Dan Nässelqvist and Chris Keith for comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

'audiences'.¹ A few scholars have even contended that the Gospel of Mark in particular was actually composed in 'oral performances' delivered in various settings, and did not originate as a written work. So what we know as the Gospel of Mark is (in this proposal) perhaps only a transcript of a given performance, and/or a script to be memorised for subsequent performances.² Indicative of the enthusiasm for this sort of thinking in some circles, in a couple of programmatic articles, David Rhoads set out 'performance criticism' as a new scholarly discipline in New Testament studies. There is now a monograph series serving as a venue for publications that advocate this approach, and it is also reflected in several other recent books on NT texts.³

- 1 See particularly W. Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg/London/New York: Trinity Press International, 2003). Shiner proposes 'applause of different types, including waving hands, loud exclamations, and rhythmic clapping', people leaping from their seats and thumping the floor with their feet, and being 'just as boisterous in condemning what they did not like' (5). Also, W. D. Shiell, *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* (Leiden: Brill, 2004). Such views are now taken as established in some reference works, e.g. P. R. Eddy, 'Orality and Oral Transmission', *DJG*² 641–50, at 646–7. It is this more precise sense of the term 'performance' that I engage here. By contrast, the term as used by Rafael Rodriguez seems so broad as to encompass practically any conveyance of Jesus tradition in any form: R. Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance, and Text* (London: T&T Clark, 2010) e.g. 81–113.
- 2 E.g. J. Dewey, 'The Survival of Mark's Gospel: A Good Story', *JBL* 123 (2004) 495–507, esp. 500. Most recently, A. C. Wire, *The Case for Mark Composed in Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). For my review of the book, see: http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/8392_9192.pdf. The basic proposal was made earlier by P. J. J. Botha, 'Mark's Story as Oral Traditional Literature: Rethinking the Transmission of Some Traditions about Jesus', *HvTSt* 47 (1991) 304–31, republished in P. J. J. Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012) 163–90 (cited here), esp. 166; and from still earlier, see T. P. Haverly, 'Oral Traditional Literature and the Composition of Mark's Gospel' (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1983).
- 3 D. M. Rhoads, 'Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part 1', *BTB* 36 (2006) 118–33; *id.*, 'Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part 2', *BTB* 36 (2006) 164–84. The monograph series, 'Biblical Performance Criticism', is published by Cascade Books. Rhoads defines 'performance' as 'any oral telling/retelling of a brief or lengthy tradition – from saying to gospel – in a formal or informal context of a gathered community by trained or untrained performers – on the assumption that every telling was a lively recounting of that tradition' ('Performance Criticism 1', 119). There is now also a programme-unit in the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, 'Performance Criticism of Biblical and Other Ancient Texts', and a web site devoted to the subject: www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org/. Other New Testament scholars linked with 'performance criticism' include J. Dewey, R. Horsley, P. J. J. Botha, W. Shiner and A. C. Wire Clark. Some participants (e.g. David Rhoads) also seem to include an interest in memorising biblical texts for oral performance today, a matter I do not engage here. Among the recent studies taking up this performance approach are those by Shiner and Shiell mentioned in n. 1 above.

In this essay, however, I show that key assumptions of ‘performance criticism’ advocates comprise a number of oversimplifications (and so distortions) of relevant historical matters, and that, consequently, the inferences drawn about the composition and use of texts in early Christianity are the more dubious. In an effort to offer something constructive as well, in the final part of this essay I point out briefly the sorts of data that we need to consider in framing a more adequate picture of the place and function of texts in early Christian circles.

1. Historical Oversimplifications

The origins of the current interest in ‘performance criticism’ appear to lie in an emphasis on ‘orality’ that emerged in New Testament studies the 1980s, perhaps particularly through Werner Kelber’s influential book, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (1983).⁴ Numerous other scholars as well have underscored the appreciation for the spoken word in the Roman era, and, as a general observation, that may be taken now as widely accepted and not under dispute here.⁵ The question is not whether Roman-era people valued the sound of words/speech, relished and promoted effective speaking (rhetoric), enjoyed lively recitations of poetry and performance of theatrical works, read literary texts aloud and enjoyed having these texts read to them, or used dictation (variously) as part of the process of composition. All these things seem to be the case. In these phenomena and others, certainly, we can characterise the Roman period as one in which an ‘orality’ (in the sense of the use and enjoyment of the spoken word) was a prominent feature.

The question then is whether the prominence of this ‘orality’ should be taken as a basis for minimising the place of texts and the activities associated with them (writing, reading, copying etc.) in that same period. I submit that in the recent advocacy of the ‘performance’ of texts in earliest Christianity there is often the fallacy of a kind of zero-sum game in which emphasising the place of Roman-

4 W. H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983; 2nd edn Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). Among the numerous critiques of the book, see J. Halverson, ‘Oral and Written Gospel: A Critique of Werner Kelber’, *NTS* 40 (1994) 180–95. Cf. the volume in tribute to Kelber: R. A. Horsley, J. A. Draper, J. M. Foley, eds., *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory and Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). Kelber depended heavily on the theorising about oral and literate cultures by Walter Ong. Also influential was the work of A. B. Lord and M. Perry on oral poetry. For an enthusiastic (even uncritical) review of works emphasising ‘orality’ in recent New Testament scholarship, see K. R. Iverson, ‘Orality and the Gospels: A Survey of Recent Research’, *CBR* 8 (2009) 71–106.

5 Among other influential studies is P. J. Achtemeier, ‘*Omne verbum sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity’, *JBL* 109 (1990) 3–27. But cf. F. D. Gilliard, ‘More Silent Reading in Antiquity: *Non omne verbum sonat*’, *JBL* 112 (1993) 689–96.

era 'orality' is at the expense of recognising the significant place of written texts and their various uses in that period, producing an oversimplification of matters.⁶ Even if in some sense the Roman world 'remained committed to the spoken word', this was by no means an exclusive commitment and did not involve less appreciation of texts, writing and reading. It is an exaggeration to claim 'a cultural bias in favour of the oral over the written' as the following discussion will show.⁷ As reflected in the many thousands of manuscripts that survive from the Roman period, the many literary works produced and circulated, the many inscriptions and the many kinds of 'documentary' texts (letters, contracts, business/commercial documents, *et al.*), writings were not mere appendages to the spoken word but were important in themselves as a major factor in many areas of life and among various levels and sectors of societies.⁸

To be fair, the sort of oversimplification among some New Testament scholars about 'orality' that I challenge here may have derived from similarly exaggerated claims in some earlier and influential publications of classicists that subsequently have received justifiable correction. In an important essay published in 2009, engaging what he referred to as then a 'widely held consensus' that texts of Republican and Augustan period poets were composed for recitations in small circles of auditors, and the widely repeated 'doctrine that literature was intended for the ears', Holt Parker warned against a simplistic 'exoticizing' of the use of literature in the Roman era.⁹ He showed amply that poets and other writers of the time in fact wrote for readers, indeed individual readers more precisely, and not simply, or even particularly, for auditors of group/oral 'performances'.¹⁰ Parker also cogently contended that 'the assumption that Rome can be considered an "oral" society in any meaningful sense because of certain types of vocal

6 This may arise from their construction of Roman 'orality' from anthropological studies and theories based on pre-literate societies, with insufficient attention given to relevant cultural specifics of the Roman era as illustrated in this essay.

7 Cf. Achtemeier, '*Omne verbum sonat*', 9.

8 See e.g. the discussion in L. W. Hurtado and C. Keith, 'Writing and Book Production in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods', *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: The Bible, From the Beginnings to 600* (ed. J. C. Paget and J. Schaper; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 63–80.

9 By 'exoticizing', Parker meant exaggerating the difference(s) between the ancient and the modern cultures.

10 H. N. Parker, 'Books and Reading Latin Poetry', in *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome* (ed. W. A. Johnson and H. N. Parker; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 186–229, at 187. Parker cited as examples of oversimplifications in influential works E. J. Kenney, 'Books and Readers in the Roman World', *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (ed. E. J. Kenney; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) II.3–50, at 3, 12, and K. Quinn, 'The Poet and His Audience in the Augustan Age', *ANRW*, II.30/1.75–180, at 82–83, and other examples as well (e.g. 189 n. 6).

performance of certain types of literary texts in certain contexts (some rightly understood, some not) is mistaken'.¹¹

Over a decade earlier still, Emmanuelle Valette-Cagnac provided a detailed analysis of the various 'reading situations' and reading practices of the Roman period, also correcting the sort of oversimplifications that drew Parker's criticism.¹² Among the many observations that make her book important for anyone seeking to grasp the place of books and reading in the Roman period is her emphasis that texts had an indispensable role, not subordinate to orality (unlike the case of ancient Greece) but complementary to it: 'Rome se caractérise par un incessant brouillage, un échange permanent, entre les fonctions de l'écriture et celles de la parole', and this 'exchange' went in both directions.¹³ Granting that writing was used in some cases to record thoughts originating in speech, she also noted equally clear evidence of texts as themselves the originating expressions, and she emphatically rejected the notion that Roman-era writing served simply as a tool to record speech.¹⁴ So, to reiterate the point for emphasis, the Roman period is better characterised as a time of rich interplay of texts and readers (both private and to/before groups), writers and speakers, and appreciation of both oral/aural and written expressions of thought and entertainment, and it is a fallacy to make the one subservient to the other in any generalising way. I briefly point to some illustrative support for this claim.

Quintilian's advice to aspiring orators is indicative of the complementary roles of texts and speech. Surely oratory was *the* oral event par excellence in the Roman world, and yet even here one sees the strong place of writing and reading. Quintilian advises reading voraciously to develop one's sense of orderly thought and style (*Inst.* 10.1.42–131). He also urges budding orators to focus on composing their thoughts in writing, which is 'the best teacher and producer of eloquence' (10.3.1), and he gives writing and editing tips (10.3.5–10, 4.1–4). It is also noteworthy that he expresses caution about composing via dictation ('now so fashionable'), not finding the results very impressive, and recommending instead that written composition produces better results, for 'the fact that the hand cannot follow the rapidity of our thoughts gives us time to think' (10.3.19). Although an experienced or particularly gifted orator may be able to

11 Parker, 'Books and Reading', 188.

12 E. Valette-Cagnac, *La lecture à Rome: rites et pratiques* (Paris: Belin, 1997). She sets out her aim as 'la description et l'analyse de pratiques et de situations de lecture' (10). See also C. Salles, *Lire à Rome* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008²). I cannot find reference to either work in the publications of advocates of 'performance criticism'.

13 Valette-Cagnac, *La lecture*, 306. This distinction between the Roman period and ancient Greece is insufficiently observed by some, who invoke studies of the latter (e.g. E. A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963)) in characterising the extent of literacy and the nature of reading in the Roman era.

14 Valette-Cagnac, *La lecture*, 308.

engage in extemporaneous speech-making, Quintilian warns against depending on it (10.7.21–2). As Parker observed about oratory, ‘It is not the case that the written text is considered a copy or record of the oral presentation. Pliny explicitly states [*Ep.* 1.20.9] that the opposite is true: the written text is the model and archetype for the speech as actually delivered.’¹⁵

Indeed, in many cases the written text was simply intended to be read in its own right and by individuals. As particularly clear examples, Parker pointed to poetic texts that were clearly ‘intended only for the eye – acrostics, picture poems, and the like ... Poems in the shape of eggs or wings, in which one has to read inward (first verse, then last, then second, then second to last, etc.), cannot be read aloud.’¹⁶

Another oversimplification is the oft-repeated claim that Roman-era reading, even private reading, was almost always reading aloud.¹⁷ This assumption in turn serves the further claim that texts were radically subordinate to ‘orality’. Certainly, texts were often read out (aloud), especially, of course, in various group-settings, such as the ‘elite circles’ of sophisticates studied by William Johnson.¹⁸ There were other, ‘sub-elite’ settings as well in which literary texts were read out for the benefit of a gathering of people, synagogues and early Christian *ekklesiiai* prominent among them.¹⁹

However, as several important (but insufficiently noticed) studies have demonstrated incontrovertibly, Roman-era readers were also quite able to read silently and

15 Parker, ‘Books and Reading’, 215. Note Parker’s forthright statement (‘Books and Reading’, 217) about the importance of books (citing as illustrative Pliny, *Ep.* 5.10.3): ‘This is true even of that most oral of all Latin literary arts, that of oratory. When someone who had not been present at a trial wished to know what was said, he did not ask Cicero or any member of the original audience to rerecitate the speech for him. He read the written text ... Much that was written was not recited; nothing was recited that was not written.’

16 Parker, ‘Books and Reading’, 192.

17 E.g. Shiner’s bold claim: ‘First-century literary works were almost always heard in a communal setting rather than read silently by individuals. This is generally accepted today ...’ (*Proclaiming*, 1). Though he grants that ‘more careful studies’ have shown that silent reading of texts, ‘even literary texts’, was common, he still asserts that writing and texts were seen as ‘a poor substitute for oral speech’ (14), and that ‘most “reading” took the form of hearing someone else read the text aloud’ (15). The key publication typically cited is J. Balogh, ‘*Voces paginarum*: Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens’, *Philologus* 82 (1927) 84–109, 202–40, but cf. more recent works cited below.

18 W. A. Johnson, ‘Towards a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity’, *AJP* 121 (2000) 593–627, and see now his book, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

19 See e.g. L. Schiffman, ‘The Early History of Public Reading of the Torah’, *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction During the Greco-Roman Period* (ed. S. Fine; London: Routledge, 1999) 44–56; M. D. Goodman, ‘Texts, Scribes and Power in Roman Judaea’, *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (ed. A. K. Bowman and G. Woolf; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 99–108.

privately, and they did so commonly.²⁰ As Johnson has noted pointedly, ‘this conclusion has been known to careful readers since at least 1968’.²¹ Silent reading of letters, for example, certainly seems to have been the usual practice; but there is plenty of evidence that larger, literary texts were also often read privately and silently.²² Indeed, one of the major points made by Parker is that literary texts such as poetry were regularly read by individuals, and silently, and that writers (e.g. Latin poets) wrote primarily for such reader-situations.²³ Similarly, Valette-Cagnac has shown that the Latin verb *legere* appears to be used in contexts that designate particularly ‘une lecture individuelle, solitaire’, and she also showed that (despite continuing contrary assertions) there is abundant evidence of silent reading of literary texts, especially among those with more advanced reading abilities.²⁴ The numerous visual depictions of solitary readers comprise further evidence of this type of reading as being common.²⁵ As A. K. Gavrilov in particular has rather decisively demonstrated, in fact Roman-era readers were well aware of the respective features and advantages of ‘oral’ and silent reading of texts; for example, silent reading is faster.²⁶ So, it is simply misinformed to assert that texts were only (or even dominantly) read aloud and in groups, and were, thus, merely appendages to ‘orality’. Even texts that were written to be read out (e.g. Paul’s letters) were foremost *texts*, and what was delivered orally was the *text*.

Some advocates of the priority of ‘orality’ also claim that the physical/visual features of ancient literary manuscripts meant that ‘reading was a physically demanding activity’, making the memorisation of literary texts for oral ‘performance’ preferable (or even necessary).²⁷ But their descriptions of ancient literary

20 Note Philo’s comments about the advantages of copying texts that one wishes to absorb fully and make an enduring part of one’s mind: *Spec.* 4.160–4; and discussion in H. Gregory Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World* (London: Routledge, 2000) 132–5.

21 Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture*, 3, and note his concise history of scholarly discussion of the question, 4–9.

22 As shown initially by B. M. W. Knox, ‘Silent Reading in Antiquity’, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 9 (1968) 421–35, and then more amply still by A. K. Gavrilov, ‘Techniques of Reading in Classical Antiquity’, *CQ* 47 (1997) 56–73; supported also by M. F. Burnyeat, ‘Postscript on Silent Reading’, *CQ* 47 (1997) 74–6. Indeed, this was also noted by a biblical scholar: Gilliard, ‘More Silent Reading’.

23 Parker, ‘Books and Reading’, esp. 191–2 on silent reading, and 195–8 on ‘reading without an audience’.

24 Valette-Cagnac, *La lecture*, esp. 26–7 (citation at 27), 29, and her extended discussion of *lectio tacita*, 29–71.

25 See examples listed e.g. in H.-I. Marrou, *MOYCIKOC ANHP: étude sur les scènes de la vie intellectuelle figurant sur les monuments funéraires romans* (Grenoble: Didier & Richard, 1938; repr.: L’Erma di Bretschneider: Rome, 1964), 61–75; and in T. Birt, *Die Buchrolle in der Kunst* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1907), e.g. 157, 160–5.

26 Gavrilov, ‘Techniques’. Botha’s effort to sidestep the force of Gavrilov’s evidence is ineffective and seems so much ‘hand-waving’ of generalities: *Orality*, 92–4.

27 So e.g. Shiner, *Peforming*, 12; Botha, *Orality*, 91, and esp. 95–104.

manuscripts are, again, typically oversimplified, and, indeed, appear to reflect a lack of direct acquaintance with the manuscripts. To be sure, especially for those accustomed to the modern printed leaf-book with its many format-features, including word-separation, a table of contents, page-numbering, paragraphing, chapter headings and punctuation, the ancient Greek or Latin literary roll ('scroll') will seem not only very different but daunting to read. Also, rolls will seem awkward to handle comfortably for reading if we are used to turning pages in a leaf-book. In particular, the typical use of *scriptio continua* (i.e. no spaces between words) and the common absence (or nearly so) of punctuation, especially in high-quality literary manuscripts, present readers of modern books in European languages with what can only seem a demanding format. But this response tells us more about modern readers (and what we are used to) than it does about ancient readers of literary manuscripts. The fact is that Greek and Latin literary manuscripts reflect a *preference* for *scriptio continua* over word-separation, probably because readers regarded it as a more elegant format.²⁸

We must realise that education in the Roman era was geared towards equipping readers progressively to cope with texts precisely in the way that they were written then. Noting that 'ancient manuscripts did not make many concessions to readers', Raffaella Cribiore shows the path that ancient students had to make to acquire the ability to read literary texts competently.²⁹ This took time and effort, certainly; but I repeat the point that the Roman-era educational process was designed expressly to develop in pupils the ability to tackle texts written in *scriptio continua* and so (in due course) to read them with understanding. For example, from early years, pupils were taught to recognise syllables, which was an approach intended to facilitate the reading of *scriptio continua*. Teachers provided copies of texts with syllables marked, sometimes also with word-separation and with punctuation inserted as well, to help pupils in early stages to develop their recognition and reading skills, so that thereafter (especially if they progressed beyond elementary educational stages) they could cope more readily with unmarked manuscripts.³⁰

We should also note that, although elite Greek literary manuscripts made 'few concessions' to readers, they did make a few concessions. One of these was that columns were formed of narrow lines, typically of *ca.* 15–20 letters, or about

28 Word-separation continued to be used often in Greek and Latin inscriptions. Though in earlier centuries Latin literary texts had word-separation, by the first century CE this had been abandoned in favour of *scriptio continua*, in emulation of Greek scribal practice. By contrast, Hebrew texts of the time continued to be written with word-separation (as reflected in the Qumran manuscripts).

29 R. Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); citing at 189, and see 189–92 on 'Reading with Understanding'.

30 Examples in Cribiore, *Gymnastics*, 137–43.

6–9 cm width.³¹ Such short lines actually make it a bit easier to cope with *scriptio continua*, and it is interesting that this linear space is about what studies have shown to be the ocular space taken in by an experienced reader in a single ‘saccade’ (eye-movement in reading).³² Also, often in prose literary texts, each successive line of a column in a roll was started just slightly to the left of the first letter of the preceding line. So, when a reader came to the end of a given line, it was easier for the eye immediately to find the next one. Poetic texts, however, were typically set out to reflect the poetic structure, enabling readers more easily to scan and read out the text with appropriate emphasis.³³

Moreover, just as those intending to read a text publicly today do, people in the ancient setting who read a text aloud for a group did not approach the task ‘cold’, trying to read it without first acquainting themselves with the text so that it could be read smoothly, with appropriate pauses, emphases and intonation.³⁴ This preparation might even include readers inserting accents, punctuation and paragraph markers in the manuscript, as reflected in some surviving examples of manuscripts marked up probably for public reading.³⁵ So, it is a red herring to point to the demanding format of ancient Greek and Latin literary texts as if this means that they were a serious impediment to trained readers, and still less that such manuscripts could not be read from but only functioned as scripts to memorise.

As for the claim that a literary roll was awkward to use in reading and so texts would have been memorised instead, this notion also simply reflects the view of readers familiar with the leaf-book. Just as is the case with today’s printed book, rolls came in various sizes, larger ones somewhat heavier and others more modest-sized and easier to hold and manipulate, and even miniature ones that were quite portable and easy to carry on one’s person. In his detailed study of the Greek literary roll, Johnson noted the typical lengths (‘a normative range of

31 E.g. E. G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1987²), Plate 84 (Phaedrus); and *P.Oxy.* XCII.3010.

32 ‘Documentary’ texts (e.g. letters, contracts etc.), however, which were not intended for public reading, typically had longer lines, often much longer.

33 Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, Plate 31 (a portion of Euripides).

34 Contrary to repeated assertions of some advocates of ‘performance criticism’, this preparation to read literary texts out to a group did not typically involve memorisation, but instead a familiarisation with the text so that it could be read out competently. Cf. e.g. Botha, *Orality*, 15: ‘A manuscript culture presupposes extensive memorization of written texts’, citing as his basis for this claim W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982) 119. But neither Botha nor Ong demonstrated any real familiarity with the actual manuscripts of the Roman period. Cf. e.g. 4Q266 (5.II.1–4; = 4Q267 5. III), which prescribes the attributes necessary for public reading of Torah. (I thank Chris Keith for this reference.)

35 I. Gallo, *Greek and Latin Papyrology* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1986), esp. 90–3; Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, 9–14; W. A. Johnson, ‘The Function of the Paragraphus in Greek Literary Prose Texts’, *ZPE* 100 (1994) 65–8.

3–15 metres'), and he calculated the sizes of rolled-up scrolls of various lengths: 'a 7.5-metre roll is, then, roughly the same diameter as a can of soda pop; a 10-metre roll roughly the same as a wine bottle; a 20-metre roll [i.e. considerably larger than the typical book of the time] slightly smaller than a 2-litre container of Coca-Cola'.³⁶ None of these would have presented any greater difficulty to handle than do books of corresponding sizes today. He also rightly warned against imposing our reading habits and aesthetics upon ancient readers, who may have expected literary/historical works to be weighty tomes.³⁷

Moreover, for readers accustomed to handling scrolls, unrolling them for reading (a column or two at a time) and rolling them up afterwards were familiar actions and would not have seemed as difficult or awkward as has been alleged. In support of this, several decades ago, after experimenting with various means of doing so, T. C. Skeat discovered that rerolling papyrus scrolls (necessary after reading the entire text) of *ca.* 10 metres length could be done quite easily and within about forty-five seconds. He concluded that this task 'presented no great difficulty to a reader' of the Roman period.³⁸ Here again, we need to avoid imputing to ancient readers our lack of familiarity with handling a papyrus roll. The stark fact is that well after the codex book-form had appeared and began to be used for literary texts, most Roman-era people (other than the Christians) continued to prefer the roll book-form.³⁹ We must presume, therefore, that they felt no great difficulty in reading texts in roll-format, and did not find that book-form the impediment to reading, consulting and conveying texts alleged by some modern scholars.

Yet another oversimplification and error relates to estimates of rates of literacy, with advocates of 'oral performance' typically emphasising that only a small minority of the Roman-era populace were literate, thus marginalising the likely place of texts in non-elite circles. Of course, in any discussion of literacy in the Roman period William Harris' influential book will be cited, in which he proposed that Roman-era adult literacy rates averaged around 10–15 per cent (allowing for a somewhat higher rate in urban settings, and somewhat lower rates in rural

36 W. A. Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 143–52 on the length of literary rolls, citation at 150.

37 Johnson, *Bookrolls*, 150–1.

38 T. C. Skeat, 'Two Notes on Papyrus', *The Collected Biblical Writings of T. C. Skeat* (ed. J. K. Elliott; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004) 60–64, at 62–3 (originally published in *Scritti in onore Orsolina Montevicchi* (ed. E. Bresciani et al.: Bologna: Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria Editrice, 1981) 373–8).

39 In a frequently cited passage Martial commends editions of his works in small parchment codex-form for those who wish to read them on a journey (*Epigrams* 1.2; and other references to small leather codices in 14.184, 188, 190, 192). But, to judge from the comparative numbers of surviving manuscripts from the first two centuries CE, as far as pagan literary texts are concerned, the codex was never more than an experiment of very limited success.

settings).⁴⁰ We may grant that it seems broadly correct that probably only a minority (perhaps a small minority) of the total population of the Empire were able to read easily and fluently, or at least able to read the more demanding literary texts with ease. However, it is important to take account of the various kinds of evidence that point to a more complex picture than some have drawn from Harris' approach.⁴¹

For example, two more recent studies of education in the Roman imperial era both emphasise that the period actually seems to have been one of comparatively wider and greater literacy than any time before it, and probably greater than in the subsequent medieval period as well, even if the majority of the Roman-era population may have been functionally illiterate. Noting what appears to be fluctuations in literacy rates across time, Teresa Morgan pointed to the appearance of grammatical texts in the first century CE, as well as the rising proportion of grammatical texts among all texts of the Roman and Byzantine centuries, as suggesting a greater number of people progressing on beyond elementary education, and so a general growth in literacy in the Roman period.⁴² Similarly, highlighting the 'extemporaneous and casual quality of Greek and Roman writing technology' in comparison with ancient Egyptian and medieval times (in the latter period writing 'required a laborious technology and much time and ability'), Cribiore judged the Roman era to have been a time of comparatively greater literacy (albeit of various levels) than the preceding and subsequent centuries.⁴³

In addition to the evidence of widespread writing, copying and reading of literary texts (even if characteristic of a minority of the general population), we also should take account of other kinds of evidence indicative of abilities to read and write, particularly among 'sub-elite' levels of society. Observing that some 11,000 pieces of writing survive in Pompeii alone, 'everything from shipping labels to scurrilous graffiti, from the famous campaign posters to lapidary inscriptions of the kinds common throughout the Roman world', and that this material 'remains largely neglected', James Franklin argued that 'the vivacity and sheer mass of the evidence suggests a widely literate population' there.⁴⁴ The

40 W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989). For a similarly low estimate of literacy in the ancient Jewish homeland, see C. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (TSAJ 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

41 Particularly noteworthy are contributions to M. Beard et al., eds., *Literacy in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1991). Also important are studies in another multi-author volume: W. A. Johnson and H. N. Parker, eds., *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

42 T. Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 63.

43 Cribiore, *Gymnastics*, 159, and similarly her warning about differences in approaches to reading and writing in the medieval versus the Roman periods, 176–8.

44 J. L. Franklin Jr, 'Literacy and the Parietal Inscriptions of Pompeii', *Literacy in the Roman World*, ed. M. Beard et al. (Ann Arbor: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1991) 77–98, at 77, 81.

Pompeii graffiti in particular indicate that various sub-elites including prostitutes, lower-class workmen and others were capable of reading and also some level of writing, which 'suggests widespread literacy'.⁴⁵ More recently, Kristina Milnor likewise has noted the amount and the interesting diversity of Pompeii graffiti, urging:

We should see the graffiti in relation to other written texts that make up the 'literate landscape' of the ancient city, texts that range from notices advertising properties, to the painted street signs that enjoin the passerby not to foul the footpath, to inscriptions on the bases of honorific statues in the forum. Graffiti share with these other writings both a fixed, material place in the urban environment and the sense that they speak to a casual, almost accidental reader, rather than someone who has deliberately chosen to encounter a text.⁴⁶

From another geographical quarter, there is the cache of wooden writing-tablets found at Vindolanda, a Roman fort near Hadrian's Wall (which date to *ca.* 90–120 CE).⁴⁷ Described as 'by far the most important and coherent body of material for the study of literacy in the western part of the early Roman empire', the texts include 'military documents and reports, accounts of cash and commodities ... large numbers of personal letters, the occasional literary text and the earliest known examples of Latin shorthand', several hundred individual hands represented and a variety of types of writing (cursive, capitals and shorthand).⁴⁸ Alan Bowman noted that the tablets comprise 'strong evidence for literacy among centurions, decurions and *principales* and some evidence for its presence at lower levels'.⁴⁹ There are letters to and from women as well as men, and 'complaints about a correspondent not having written frequently enough imply quite a high level of expectation and probably implicate a fairly broad range of people (not just the equestrian officer class) in the literacy-using network'.⁵⁰

But probably the most wide-ranging study of non/sub-elite types of writing (thus far) is Roger Bagnall's slim volume, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-*

45 Franklin Jr, 'Literacy', 97.

46 K. Milnor, 'Literary Literacy in Roman Pompeii: The Case of Vergil's *Aeneid*', *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome* (ed. W. A. Johnson and H. N. Parker; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 288–319, at 294.

47 A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas, 'Vindolanda 1985: The New Writing-Tablets', *JRS* 76 (1986) 120–3; *idem*, 'New Texts from Vindolanda', *Britannia* 18 (1987) 125–42.

48 A. K. Bowman, 'The Roman Imperial Army: Letters and Literacy on the Northern Frontier', *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (ed. A. K. Bowman and G. Woolf; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 109–25, at 109–110.

49 Bowman, 'The Roman Imperial Army', 112.

50 Bowman, 'The Roman Imperial Army', 122. On the impressive circulation of letters, see also E. J. Epp, 'New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times', *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. B. A. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 35–56.

Roman East.⁵¹ Despite its modest size, Bagnall's book is rich with data and wise judgments. Complementing the studies of Pompeii graffiti, he offers a fascinating discussion of graffiti from Smyrna, followed by analyses of several other types of what he calls 'everyday' writing, concluding: 'The ubiquity and pervasiveness of everyday writing in Greek is clearly visible', and urging: 'Even in a world where many people could not read or write, the use of written languages was not something restricted to a small, high-status group. Writing was everywhere, and a very wide range of people participated in the use of writing in some fashion.'⁵²

Similarly, Guglielmo Cavallo noted that in the Greco-Roman period reading became a feature of much wider circles than ever before, referring to 'a public of new readers distinct from both the highly educated circles of literati and teachers and from the uncultivated masses, a mid-range public that even included some members of the lower classes'.⁵³ He described 'this "average" reading public' as 'made up of a middle social stratum of people with some schooling (some might even be very well educated) that included technicians, government functionaries, high-ranking military men, merchants, relatively cultivated craftspeople and agriculturists, wealthy parvenus, well-off women and *faciles puellae*'.⁵⁴ The types of literature likewise were more varied, including 'escapist poetry, paraphrastic epic, history in the reduced form of biographies or abridged in compendia, little manuals on cooking or sports, brief works on games and pastimes, erotica, horoscopes, texts on magic or the interpretations of dreams, and, above all, fictional narratives', as well as pamphleteering texts and illustrated pornography.⁵⁵

Once again, we also have visual evidence in support of the views of these scholars. Perhaps the most well-known example is the painting of the young couple from Pompeii, both of whom assert their literacy prominently (and, we presume, proudly). The young man holds a literary roll and the young woman a set of wax tablets and a stylus.⁵⁶ In another Pompeii painting from a merchant's premises, we see various items intended to reflect the man and his business, including a

51 R. S. Bagnall, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Bagnall describes his book modestly as a set of case studies, and his call for more to be done before a systematic study can be written is appropriate, but until that systematic work is done his study must be taken as essential reading.

52 Bagnall, *Everyday Writing*, 141–2. To cite still another location for which we have an abundance of data, there is Oxyrhynchus. See esp. A. K. Bowman, R. A. Coles, N. Gonis, D. Obbink and P. J. Parsons, eds., *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007); and, for a very readable overview, P. Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek Lives in Roman Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007) esp. 137–74.

53 G. Cavallo, 'Between *Volumen* and Codex: Reading in the Roman World', *A History of Reading in the West* (ed. G. Cavallo and R. Chartier; Oxford: Polity, 1999) 64–89, at 69.

54 *Ibid.*, 77.

55 *Ibid.*, 78–9.

56 The couple was often thought to be Paquius Proculus and his wife, but more recently they are identified as the baker Terentius Neo and his wife.

pile of coins, a set of tablets (probably for calculations and notes) and a scroll with a pen and inkwell next to it. This merchant obviously wanted to assert that his reading abilities and tastes ran beyond simply keeping track of his sales.⁵⁷ These paintings suggest that people of sub-elite levels prized abilities to read and write, including, so they claimed, the ability to read what look like literary texts.

In this light it is worth noting Wayne Meeks's conclusion that the 'typical' member of Pauline congregations was 'a free artisan or small trader', at least some of whom 'had houses, slaves, the ability to travel, and other signs of wealth', 'the most active and prominent members' probably 'upwardly mobile' individuals with 'drive, abilities, and opportunities'.⁵⁸ This seems to me a rough fit with the sort of individuals depicted in the Pompeii paintings, the sort of people who would have, or want to acquire, a reading ability to advance themselves. Such individuals (probably not as rare as some have assumed) who embraced Christian faith would also have been able to read out texts to the Christian gatherings of which they were a part.

I turn now to yet another problem in some studies taking a performance criticism approach: the confusion of the reading of texts to groups with the actions of orators and/or actors.⁵⁹ This is a serious category mistake. To cite again Parker's discussion of the recitation of Roman-era poetry,

We do not find literature being performed from memory without a text in front of a reader. Indeed, one of the things that mark theatrical performance is not only the assumption of roles (pretending to be someone you are not), but precisely this absence of a visible text, and great pains were taken to distinguish the readers of texts from the actors of plays.⁶⁰

Later in his essay Parker again cautions about confusing the recitation of poetry in social settings with theatrical performance, urging:

... the notion of 'performance' needs to be interrogated. Elaborate precautions were taken to avoid tainting the poet-performer with the *infamia* of the actor. The reciter was always seated; he always had a text open before him; he did not use his hands; he avoided facial expressions. The poet must not be mistaken for an actor.⁶¹

57 The fresco is housed in the Naples National Archaeological Museum. For a reproduction, see Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, Plate 10. Turner (34) assumed that the tablets and papyrus roll 'are more likely documents than books', but the roll in the painting looks more like an ordinary literary roll to me.

58 W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 73 (and 51–73 for his analysis of the evidence).

59 This is precisely the tactic taken by Shiner (*Proclaiming*), and Shiel (*Reading Acts*).

60 Parker, 'Books and Reading', 188.

61 Parker, 'Books and Reading', 203.

We also have visual evidence that confirms this, scenes from the Roman period depicting the reading of literary texts. For example, in a painting from Pompeii, a seated youth with an opened roll reads to a small group of people, one of whom points to the text, apparently interested in its contents.⁶² By contrast, orators and public figures are often depicted with a closed roll in one hand, typically gesturing with the other hand.⁶³ It was obviously more effective for orators to rehearse their speeches and not need to resort to reading them, just as is still the case today for barristers and political leaders.⁶⁴ Actors, likewise, memorised their speeches, and enlivened their roles with bodily actions. But in reading literary texts, e.g. in dinner gatherings or other social settings, the emphasis was on skilful reading, which included appropriate pauses, emphasis and pacing.⁶⁵ We should not confuse *lectores* with actors and orators.⁶⁶

Finally, we should note the confusion over the use of dictation, as if this amounted to *composition* of texts in 'performance'. To be sure, poets, orators and other writers often (but not always) used dictation as a step in writing.⁶⁷ This involved speaking thoughts, which were taken down by a secretary, after which the author worked up a complete draft of the poem, speech, letter or treatise. This draft might be read out to a circle of acquaintances for comments (*recitatio*), after which a final draft would be made for delivery/performance (e.g. an oration) and/or for circulation (e.g. poetry, prose writings). But such a 'performance' of a speech or poem involved the oral presentation of *the previously written text*. I know of no Roman-era evidence that any extended literary work was actually *composed* in 'performance'. That a work such as the Gospel of Mark is written in a kind of oral 'register' (i.e. reflecting some of the syntactical traits of spoken Koine Greek) is not a basis for asserting that it was *composed* in/through 'performance'.⁶⁸

62 The painting is reproduced in Birt, *Die Buchrolle*, 133.

63 E.g. the example in Birt, *Die Buchrolle*, 59.

64 The use of the teleprompter by political leaders, which enables them to appear to be speaking without resort to text, illustrates the continuing appeal of this oratorical conceit.

65 Cavallo ('Between *Volumen* and *Codex*', 73) noted that reading books of poetry, history and philosophy well in social gatherings 'required an expressive reading style, in which the reader's tone of voice and cadences were adjusted to the specific nature of the text and its typical stylistic effects'.

66 R. J. Starr, 'Reading Aloud: Lectores and Roman Reading', *CJ* 86 (1991) 337-43, at 338.

67 But Myles McDonnell has shown that even upper-class Romans also often chose to write *sua manu*, particularly when writing and correcting texts: M. McDonnell, 'Writing, Copying, and the Autograph Manuscripts in Ancient Rome', *CQ* 46 (1996) 469-91.

68 Note the extended and persuasive critique of claims that Herodotus composed his works in oral performance: W. A. Johnson, 'Oral Performance and the Composition of Herodotus' *Histories*', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 35 (1994) 229-54; and also the strong critique the claim of 'oral composition' in medieval studies by F. H. Bäuml, 'Medieval Texts and the Two Theories of Oral-Formulaic Composition: A Proposal for a Third Theory', *New Literary History* 16 (1984) 31-49.

In sum at this point, there are a number of oversimplifications that afflict the current advocacy of ‘performance criticism’, and thus render its depiction of the use and place of texts in the Roman world distorted. The inferences about early Christian use of texts made on the basis of these oversimplifications are, thus, dubious.

2. Early Christian Evidence

We now turn to note briefly direct evidence of how texts were used in early Christian circles.⁶⁹ I begin by noting the evidence provided in our earliest extant artefacts of Christian reading, i.e. manuscripts of Christian texts, a number of which are palaeographically dated to the third century CE, a few as early as some time in the second century CE.⁷⁰ Though only remnants of the original manuscripts remain (of varying sizes ranging from fragments to more sizeable portions), these give us valuable data. They provide us with evidence that Christians read texts in groups and privately as well, with some manuscripts rather obviously intended for personal/private reading and study, and others probably intended for use in Christian gatherings.

It is particularly noteworthy that, in addition to exhibiting the well-known Christian preference for the codex book-form, a number of these early manuscripts (particularly copies of biblical texts) also exhibit various ‘readers’ aids’ intended to facilitate (and guide) the reading of the texts (probably reading out to a group) that they contain.⁷¹ For example, we see elementary punctuation (‘high stop’ and/or ‘middle stop’ marks), and the use of enlarged spaces to signal sense-units (such as sentences), sometimes ‘line-filler’ marks, and/or ‘*ekthesis*’ (the initial letter of a line commencing slightly into the left margin), these devices signalling larger sense-units (of roughly paragraph size). We also find use of a ‘dialeresis’ (or ‘trema’, two dots, like an *Umlaut*) placed over a Greek vowel, either to avoid it being taken as part of a diphthong or to signal that it commences a word.⁷² In addition, some Christian biblical manuscripts in particular feature writing that is larger than is typical of pagan literary

69 For the most comprehensive discussion, see H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

70 For fuller discussion of the evidence, see L. W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). There I provide a list of manuscripts dated to the pre-Constantinian period in Appendix 1 (209–29). See now also the judgements about the date of early NT manuscripts in P. Orsini and W. Clarysse, ‘Early New Testament Manuscripts and Their Dates: A Critique of Theological Palaeography’, *ETL* 88 (2012) 443–74.

71 See Hurtado, *Artifacts*, 155–92.

72 Palaeographers distinguish the ‘organic’ use of the ‘dialeresis’ or ‘trema’ (to indicate that a vowel is not part of a diphthong) and the ‘inorganic’ use (to mark an initial vowel in a

manuscripts, with somewhat larger spaces between letters and larger line-spacing, which also seem to reflect a manuscript that was prepared for easier reading, and that probably means public reading.

I emphasise that in Christian manuscripts these devices are typically written by the copyist, not added later by readers of the texts. This means that these manuscripts were prepared specifically to assist readers. Given that ancient scribes of Greek manuscripts primarily copied their exemplar, this suggests that these readers' aids may derive from even earlier than the extant manuscripts in which we find them used. Similar devices are occasionally found in some pagan literary texts, but not as frequently as in Christian ones, especially in those copies of texts apparently intended for use in corporate worship.⁷³

It is interesting to compare these Christian biblical manuscripts with the rather demanding nature of high-quality manuscripts of pagan literary texts. Taking a cue from Johnson's cogent proposal that the daunting format of the latter was a deliberate reflection of the elite and highly educated circles in which they were read, I have argued that the use of readers' aids in Christian biblical manuscripts was intended to enable a wider spectrum of people to read them, including readers of sub-elite social levels.⁷⁴ Certainly, to reiterate the point, these readers' aids indicate manuscripts intended to be read, not simply studied and memorised for some sort of oratorical or theatrical 'performance'.

To mention yet another feature that characterises (and distinguishes) Christian manuscripts, there is the curious scribal practice now referred to as the '*nomina sacra*'.⁷⁵ The words in question were all central in the religious vocabulary and faith of early Christianity, and it is commonly held that the distinctive way they were written comprises a visual expression of piety.⁷⁶ We

word, or sometimes a final vowel). See the discussion and examples in Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, 12.

73 For a discussion of the occasional use of punctuation and other devices in pagan literary texts, see Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, 9–14. See also S. D. Charlesworth, 'Public and Private Second- and Third-Century Gospel Manuscripts', *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon* (ed. C. A. Evans and H. D. Zacharias; London: T&T Clark, 2009) 148–75, who contends cogently that these readers' aids distinguish copies of the gospels intended for public/liturgical usage from copies intended for personal/private reading. Note also his forthcoming book: *Early Christian Gospels: Their Production and Transmission* (Florence: Edizioni Gonnelli, 2014).

74 Johnson, 'Towards a Sociology of Reading'; L. W. Hurtado, 'Manuscripts and the Sociology of Early Christian Reading', *The Early Text of the New Testament* (ed. C. E. Hill and M. J. Kruger; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 49–62; id., 'What do the Earliest Christian Manuscripts tell us about their Readers?', *The World of Jesus and the Early Church* (ed. C. A. Evans; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011) 179–92.

75 For fuller discussion and references to other scholarly publications, see Hurtado, *Artifacts*, 95–134.

76 The earliest and most consistently attested words are Κύριος, Θεός, Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός.

cannot say for sure when the practice began, but it is already familiar and developed in our earliest Christian biblical manuscripts, which take us back to sometime in the second century CE.⁷⁷ My point here is that, along with an appreciation for oral/aural phenomena, the *nomina sacra* show a surprisingly early physical and visual dimension to texts in manuscript form in early Christianity.⁷⁸

Finally, there are a number of places in early Christian writings that describe texts being read, most often in group-settings.⁷⁹ They all portray a copy of the text in question being read out; and none of them reflects some supposedly memorised or theatrical ‘performance’ of the text. We may begin with scenes set in synagogues, such as the well-known event in Luke 4.16–21, Jesus pictured as being handed a copy of Isaiah and opening it to a passage for reading out. Thereafter, he closes the roll and hands it back to an attendant, and then speaks to the text read. Acts 13.15 depicts the reading of ‘the law and the prophets’ in the Perga synagogue; 15.21 refers to regular reading of ‘Moses’ on the Sabbath in synagogues; and in 17.10–11 Jews in Beroea are praised for their eager and extended examination of their scriptures in response to Paul’s proclamation.

To shift to early Christian circles, in several places in NT writings the reader of the text is directly addressed (ὁ ἀναγινώσκων), including Mark 13.14 (// Matt 24.15) and Revelation 1.3. In every case, nothing suggests anything other than someone reading from the text for a social circle, the latter referred to as those who hear the text read (addressed also in Rev 22.18).

At several points in the Corinthian correspondence, Paul refers to his letters to the church, and the responses that they elicited. In 1 Cor 5.9–13, he complains about his previous letter being misunderstood.⁸⁰ In 2 Cor 1.13, however, he professes to write what the Corinthians should be able to read and understand. In 2 Cor 10.9–10, Paul cites the view of some that, although his letters are ‘weighty and strong’, his ‘bodily presence’ (παρουσία τοῦ σώματος) is weak and his speaking contemptible (ὁ λόγος ἐξουθενημένος), which suggests that his letters were essentially read out to the group, apparently not ‘performed’ in some dramatically effective fashion.⁸¹ The solemn exhortation in 1 Thess 5.27 is that this epistle be

77 I have suggested that the practice may have originated in an early Jewish-Christian setting, perhaps as early as the late first-century CE: L. W. Hurtado, ‘The Origin of the *Nomina Sacra*: A Proposal’, *JBL* 117 (1998) 655–73.

78 L. W. Hurtado, ‘The Earliest Evidence of an Emerging Christian Material and Visual Culture: The Codex, the *Nomina Sacra* and the Staurogram’, *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson* (ed. S. G. Wilson and M. Desjardins; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000) 271–88.

79 See also the discussion in Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 205–8. The historicity of any of the events is beside the point, which is simply that these passages reflect the use of texts familiar to intended readers of the time.

80 And, of course, in 1 Cor. 7.1 Paul refers to a letter sent to him by the Corinthian church.

81 Cf. the claims about performances of Paul’s letters in Botha, *Orality*, 193–211.

read out to 'all the brothers'. The author of Colossians orders the reading, circulation and exchange of Pauline epistles with other churches (Col 4.16). Finally, note 2 Pet 3.15–16, where the author appears to know a collection of Pauline letters, mentioning that they present some complexities for readers, and complaining that 'the ignorant and unstable twist them' and 'the other scriptures'. It is the texts that are in focus, not some supposed 'performance' of them.

All of these references seem rather clearly to reflect the reading of texts (from manuscripts) in early Christian circles, similarly to the references to, and visual depictions of, texts read in non-Christian social gatherings of the time. There is nothing in any of these references to support the idea that these or other texts were 'performed' in the ways depicted by some recent scholars who base their claims on the behaviour of actors and/or orators. There would have been a concern to read texts as skilfully as possible, of course, but the point is that the action in question was reading from a manuscript. There is certainly no indication of the delivery of these or other extended Christian texts from memory.⁸²

3. Conclusion

Advocates of 'performance criticism' are right to pose questions about how texts functioned in earliest Christianity, and to emphasise the place of the spoken word in the Roman era. But it is important to avoid oversimplifications and ensure that we develop an accurate picture of matters. There is no basis for claiming that texts played a minor role in the Roman era, serving as mere adjuncts to 'orality', or that in early Christian circles texts were typically delivered from memory and not read out, or that they were composed in performance. Texts of all kinds, including particularly literary texts, were central in practically all areas of Roman life, and nowhere more so than in the circles that comprised earliest Christianity.

Early Christian texts refer to prophets, apostles, teachers, and various other types of believers who contributed to the life of Christian circles, but we have no indication of oratorical performances from memory, or itinerant Christian rhapsodes going about composing orally and reciting extended prose texts such as we have in the New Testament. In the case of the gospels, to be sure, we have texts that draw upon and incorporate traditions that probably circulated orally (though not exclusively so, if e.g. the 'Q' source is accepted and taken into account). As noted earlier, the Gospel of Mark in particular seems to preserve features of an oral 'register' (e.g. frequent use of *καί*), and that may well have been a choice by the author, precisely in order to give the text a certain storytelling 'air'.

82 Cf. e.g. R. Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance and Text* (London: T&T Clark, 2010) 6 n. 8. Of course, those familiar with texts can often *cite* particular passages from memory, but that is not the point under discussion here.

But it is a *non sequitur* to take this oral register as evidence that Mark itself was composed in oral performance, and/or is simply the transcript of such an event.⁸³ To repeat the point for emphasis, there is no Roman-era example of such an extended prose literary text *composed* in 'performance', and no basis for positing that Mark was so composed. As was the case for other Roman-era authors, NT writers often (typically?) composed their texts with a view to them being read aloud to groups and experienced aurally. But NT texts are the products of authors who wrote for readers and for those who would hear their texts read out.

83 So e.g. Dewey, 'The Survival of Mark's Gospel'. But cf. C. Keith, 'Prolegomena on the Textualization of Mark's Gospel: Manuscript Culture, the Extended Situation, and the Emergence of Written Gospels', *Keys and Frames: Memory and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. T. Thatcher; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, forthcoming).