

A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE WRITING WORLD IN WHICH THE NEW TESTAMENT 'WORD OF GOD' WAS WRITTEN

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For seven centuries, from Homer (maybe?) to the first century CE, writing became highly developed and rigorously practised. It was a costly pursuit, given the difficulties encountered in preparing for use the necessary writing materials of papyrus, parchment or vellum and the inks. Writers needed writing desks too at which they could stand to write, and tables too on which they could lay down the pieces of text they finished, one piece after the other, for gathering up at the last in the order they had planned for their finished works.

Yet, for whom were the writers writing? For what reason were the writings written? Writings were needed by the judiciary and the courts, in the markets, in trading and the economy, the running of nations, cities and regions. Writings were also needed by the public in the forum and the amphitheatre. But for the public, they were read out aloud, or recited from memory. In general, people who were working every day for their survival did neither read nor write. For the seven centuries, therefore, it was accepted that few people would ever read, that is, that the majority would never read.

The writers' responsibilities, therefore, were to the authors who engaged them, their readers, reciters and their audiences, especially if their works were plays, epics, letters, or recitals for performing not only in their own cities, but in distant places. Works that were created for general circulation had to be composed so that they could be copied and put into the hands of readers and reciters who would teach others who could not read, but who could set them, nevertheless, to memory, and, in turn, pass them on to others beyond their home city.

Copyists, like the writers, needed writing desks at which they could stand to write down capital letter after capital letter, from the alphabet, as they were dictated to do by one at the front of the room at another lectern facing theirs. Picture a room, if you will, with up to fifty copyists within it. These 'scribes' needed the same materials as the initial writers. Besides the papers, inks and pens (feathers and cutters) they needed straight-edges (rulers) and pencils with which they could first set-up their 'papers' before they could begin laying down the script, one letter at a time, each in juxtaposition with no gaps between words. According to historical cases, they *could be* asked to produce copy in three or four columns. If it was three, the columns of rows (equally-spaced) would be wider than those in a four column presentation. The lines were applied by pencil. Note now that these copyists needed to know only the letters that were to be laid down at the command of the man at the front. They themselves did not need to be able to read. They only needed to be able to present clearly the letters they were asked to. Their skills for which payment had to be made were no more, therefore, than those of a simple (graphic?) artist. In the early copying process, they were not employed as able readers; that would have entailed greater costs.

The writer, therefore, of a work (text, or manuscript) that was to be copied would know that his readers would be confronted with rows of capital letters in columns with no gaps between words and no punctuation. He would know that his reader would have to be able to interpret these alphabetical letters into their words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs and chapters (sections). Edentations would be provided in the left hand margin that would consist of a protruding (half-size to full-size) letter often with a blank space in the line above it; these would identify paragraphs and chapters. But if the reader was to interpret the writer's intentions, and, in turn, all readers and reciters in any city or age, in exactly the same way as each other, then the writer clearly had to provide a text that was disciplined in its layout.

It is this that translators, in the general case, have known little or nothing about through seventeen centuries. Their translations demonstrate this. They have seen the words only, and not the works! Yet, the discipline of these New Testament Greek writings has always been open to being tested against the rules of Hellenist writing. The five rules are Invention, Structure, Style, Memory and Performance.

We take Style first. There were, after seven centuries of writing development, an accumulation of styles for any writer to choose from: for example, ABB', AA' and ABB'A'. Style ABB' is the style employed by all the writers of the New Testament's texts, where A is the introductory piece, B is the first development and B' is the second, paralleling and completing development of this three-part presentation. The nearest and earliest we get to this is in Homer's use of dactylic hexameter in his *Iliad*. A dactyl is made up of three parts, one long syllable followed by two short syllables (observe the topside of one of your forefingers, *δακτυλος* being the Greek for it). AA' is two-part parallelism and ABB'A' stands out as a chiasm (chiasmus) in its simplest and most ancient form. In the New Testament texts, ABB' is discovered at up to seven literary levels of text simultaneously, from three words to a phrase to a clause to a sentence to a paragraph to a section to a composite section. It is an impressive writing technique that can be developed by anyone today, but who would want to, or even need to, given that we have printed copy and that the majority can read? The writer's responsibility was to introduce his choice of style to the reader in his opening piece and then to continue its use throughout the whole work to its end. This was the writer's best help to the reader for interpreting the columns and rows of capital letters. (I have had people reading the story of THELITTLEREDHEN completely without spaces between words and without punctuation. This text reveals its structure through regular and significant repetitions.)

Structure to the reader is the next best help that the writer has left him. The writer could choose from a great selection that included: ABB', ABB'A', AA' and ABB'XABB' (as followed by Homer in the *Iliad* along also with ABB'A'), also 1,2,C,2',1' and extended variations like 1,2,3,C,3',2',1' which replicates the shaping of the menorah, also 4x7 and 7x4 arrangements, and 7x7, 7x12 and so on. (The New Testament's structural use of sevens does indeed conjour up images of the menorah: see John's Gospel's Prologue for extensions to the

rabbis' interpretation of what the lampstand stood for; and the Revelation to John for a menorahic 7x7 structure.) It was Augustine who said there is no understanding a text without first understanding its structure. All the known large texts of Greek writing are symmetrical in their arrangement (just like the pediments of Greek temples). It is true of those of the New Testament too, where only the shortest texts are found utilising the structure, ABB'. It is clear to me too that the actual 'numbers' of the parts and pieces of the texts of the New Testament, for the writers, carry meaning in themselves. For example, Mark's Gospel comprises Four Series of Seven Days, where the Series follow the scheme ABB'A'. Two outer series enclose two inner series. Four as a number represents universality (think of the four winds, the four points of the compass). Seven as a number represents perfection, completion, fulfilment. There is meaning to the structure of Mark's Gospel. For those who would wish to interpret it, they need to know that the Days in the Series are arranged as ABB'XABB', where around a central Day X (the turning point) are sub-series of Days ABB' where, in the first three, Jesus completes and fulfils the Old Covenant and, in the second three, establishes the New.

Clearly, structure aids memorising, when it is defined by numbers, or revealed in three-part (ABB') series, or in chiasm like 1,2,C,2',1', as with the five books (it is in the Hebrew) of the Pentateuch, the five sections of the Letter to the Romans and the five alternating sections of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel. Structure aids performance too, very especially where dualities disclose order. In Mark's Gospel, for example, dualities work horizontally between Days within the Series; they work vertically also between Days of the two middle Series and between Days of the two outer Series; and they even also work diagonally between Days in the outer Series. Of the latter, the most important diagonal duality is between the first and last Days of the Narrative: in the first, the sun sets on the Sabbath of the Old Covenant and in the last, the sun rises on the Sabbath of the New Covenant. Such a keenly placed duality tells us clearly, sharply and convincingly what purpose the writer, along with the author, chose to write about. Their title tells us their work is the *Beginning of the 'Bravo News' of Jesus Christ* - as Jesus completes the Old Covenant and establishes the New. The writer and the author together are responsible for this Invention; it is the purpose for which they write.

We can now see that the writer was a particularly skilled person, who was a trained and experienced professional. The writer was no amanuensis, writing down what he was told. See how the NIV translates the work of Tertius at the end of the Letter to the Romans as if he were 'writing down' this letter. The Greek reads 'writing', not 'writing down' (see 16.22). Likewise, the writer was no secretary, taking down in shorthand (or in notes) what a would-be author wanted. The work demanded that the author and the writer (rhetor) worked together. In the ending to the Letter to the Galatians, we see how Paul refers to his childish writing. He is inexperienced in writing, as also in presenting text. Regularly, we read opening greetings to his Letters which he shares with another or others. The named persons are likely his rhetors. Professional rhetors were employed for their know-how in constructing texts to the rules and practices of the day; they were people who could present choices of style and structure to their client to help him communicate what he wanted to say in

writing, while keeping him to the conventions, but open nevertheless to opportunities to express different moods as well as changes of pace in the presentation - to help the author keep the attention of his listeners.

For seventeen-hundred years, mainstream scholarship has been almost totally unaware of these things that lie behind the texts of the New Testament. No one has noticed the discipline of the writings, nor understood what were the responsibilities and roles of the actual writers and the reasons why the writings had to be disciplined. Translators themselves have seen only the words, and not the works that also needed translating, or transmitting. The eyes of most scholars have been on the contents of the texts and not on the bearers of the contents, that is the grammar and the layout and the punctuation that is suggested by a proper 'parsing' of the texts. For this most of us have never been prepared. Most students of literature in the UK, whether they have been students of English Literature, Latin or Greek, have been asked at some time or another to 'parse a sentence', to give each word and phrase within it its proper grammatical term in an examination of syntax. But parsing was never so dull to the first readers of the New Testament writers' texts! Readers, then, had to bring *their skills* in syntax and grammar to a whole text *in order to establish* its sentences, paragraphs and sections, its words, phrases and clauses, its writing style and structure, and because of its structure its meaning and its purpose as a work of writing.

Nothing less than a revolution in the reading of New Testament texts is promised today. It is true also of our understanding of the texts. Opportunities have been missed in the past. In the early centuries, when priests received copies of the New Testament in Greek, they translated them, whether they were capable or not, into Latin. The tragic result was that the disciplined works of the New Testament writers became obscured. In the middle-ages, the addition of chapter and verse further obscured things, and as lectionary systems for reading were developed, the intentions of the authors and writers for the reading of their texts were set back even more. Inaccurate Latin texts were the focus of church courts from the third century up until the Reformation. At that time, the attention of reformers turned, with a jolt, back to the Greek texts, but chaos prevailed once more as the best Greek New Testament was sought. A new level of mayhem was reached as the thoughts of some turned to considerations of new translations - in European languages! Since then, of course, there has been the burgeoning of different developments of the texts, with printed copies emerging in translations of every kind as churches and scholars attempt to present these texts 'meaningfully', taking account of cultural changes, being in sympathy with gender issues and doing all things in the light of political correctness. Bible editors, too, have seized the right to bring their own ideas to the sectionalising of the texts, and, besides that, their own uninformed thoughts about suitable headings. And given that it must be clearly stated somewhere in this paper, the centuries-old layout of the New Testament continues to do nothing to ensure a reading of the texts as the authors and writers together intended. The earliest writings led to other writings and, in turn, to other writings, as each author reflected on what had been presented before them. The current ordering does nothing to disclose the

progressions of thought, the development of differences and the holding together of contrasting understandings.

In the 1740s, it was John Albert Bengel who first identified all the texts of the New Testament to be works of chiasmus (chiasm), but sadly it was not his time. That came eventually, only in the early part of the twentieth century! Since then, in the modern era, others like Burton L Mack and Vernon K Robbins (in the 1990s) identified and laid down, for the understanding of New Testament scholars, the rules of Hellenist writing. Together, Mack and Robbins got very close to revealing the science of the texts and to an objective approach to them, but they themselves fell short, distracted by chreia, as others since have been distracted. They missed seeing the connections between the rules of Hellenist classical writing, which they themselves revealed, and the Greek texts of the New Testament. I am a Methodist like Mack and Robbins, a Minister and Architect too. As such, the burden for revealing the appropriate ways of reading these texts has fallen to me, and for forty years it has been a real burden knowing things that all readers of the New Testament should know. The texts deserve to be read and understood for what they are. I am keen to label the writers themselves as 'Christendom's First Methodists', for their ordering of what to the authors was 'eternal truth' and for the literary assistance they gave the authors, of what were to become New Testament texts, to achieve what they were called to produce for the church in the earliest centuries of its development. We cannot and must not let this opportunity pass us by in this generation. Academia and the Church both badly need this reconstruction of the first-century writing world of the New Testament to free us all for the adventure of discerning Christian Faith for Today.

At the last, we now consider descriptions that have been given to the books of the New Testament, firstly from the beginning, that they are inspired, 'God-breathed', and latterly, more recently also inerrant and infallible. I sit comfortably with the first, but not at all with the second and third terms: for me, it is never appropriate to apply these descriptions to biblical texts because between one text and another we can easily discern difference in developments of thought and understanding. We add too that the texts are known as the 'Word of God', but my focus on the writing world that pertained at the time of the birth of Christianity shows the texts to be very much the 'Works of Men'. Men collaborated in the writing of these texts: we define those who were the skilled and professional rhetors and those who would take what was orally developing and feel compelled to set it down in writing for a growing and spreading church. We may say rightly that Paul needed to write letters as he was prevented from delivering his spoken words to the churches he founded because of his numerous imprisonments. But it was the geographically extending church that needed the writings that would hold the church to the same beliefs and understandings wherever it travelled. As each of these texts was authorised for distribution, it was given canonical status, that is, before the texts of the New Testament were ever brought together. That God chose to act in favour of all the peoples of the world by sending his Son at the time of the Pax Romana, for many biblical scholars, shows his pragmatism: he seized his opportunity. To this, I now want to add that he chose to use, to his advantage, men's skills

in a (pre-printing) world of writing Greek texts that had undergone seven-hundred years of development. In the past, the church has wanted to believe that for every book of the New Testament there was only one inspired writer. It now has to acknowledge that for each work there were at least two persons, an inspired author and a gifted rhetor. Through the two, God's will was accomplished. Through the two, 'God's (written) Word' was produced. The good result in our generation is that we all, including the Church and Academia, can get to know these texts in the ways that they have always deserved to be known.

This reconstruction is based on readings across a number of subjects and much research undertaken over forty years. For evidence of Hellenist writing in the New Testament, for the Greek texts fully-parsed and rhetorically analysed, and for a literal translation of the majority of these texts, visit: www.new-testament-new-testimony.com (i.e. ***New Testament: New Testimony to the Skills of the Writers and First Readers***, first published in 2003, revised and extended through two decades to 2022).

And for some of the significant papers and books that have influenced this reconstruction of the writing world of the New Testament, visit the 'Introduction' on the above NT:NT website and go to the Bibliography at its end. For another basic and most helpful Bibliography, visit ***Rhetoric and the New Testament***, Burton L Mack, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1990.

This paper is offered in tribute to the work and life of Burton L Mack who died on the 9th March this year.

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