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PRIVILEGED RESPONSIBILITY IN ANCIENT EDUCATION AND READING PRACTICES: AN APPEAL TO THE PAST FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE FUTURE

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**Introduction**

Scholars of ancient literary culture agree that literacy in our modern sense—being able to handle, digest, and interpret a physical text—was not a widespread phenomenon in the Greco-Roman world. It is widely accepted that only 10% of the Roman Empire was literate and that number dips even lower for agrarian rural cultures such as Judea.[[1]](#footnote-1) And yet, as Teresa Morgan points out, texts permeated every aspect of society. In her words, “These were profoundly literate societies, despite the relatively small number of functional literates and probably much smaller number of deeply literate people of whom we have evidence. Literacy, in public or in private, was a way of living, a way of working and a way of thinking.”[[2]](#footnote-2) How then were texts conveyed to a largely illiterate populace? The answer: a trained textual mediator, termed by H. Gregory Snyder a “text-broker.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Text-brokers were educated people who transmitted and interpreted texts in settings from classrooms to synagogues.

While literacy rates in modern America far surpass those of ancient Judea, our public remains similarly functionally illiterate regarding religious texts. Only 55% of people surveyed by the Pew Research Group know that the Golden Rule is not part of the Ten Commandments. In terms of the New Testament, only 45% of the respondents could name all four gospels.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nevertheless, these same people are often still curious about religion, so when they encounter perceived experts—like those of us in this room—their questions abound. Our qualifications and positions of textual authority make us the modern-day text-brokers for religioUs material. Though our texts may be available to the public, we are often seen by students and peers as authoritative interpreters on the basis of our educational backgrounds.

As we strive to transmit our knowledge, we negotiate a tension between accessibility and scholarly rigor within our fields. The former broadens our impact, but the latter adds authoritative credibility to our academic voices. It is my belief that the Hellenistic "text-brokers" provide a model for balancing high-level study with pedagogy—a way to keep the ivory tower from becoming an echo chamber. My goal is not to put forth a proposal for the best method of teaching. Instead, I hope that the introduction of these lesser-known historical text-brokers can not only lend ancient authority to our modern techniques, but also lead to a renewed appreciation of our pedagogical principles.

Towards this goal, I proceed in three parts. First, I explain the role of the Hellenistic text-broker as both vehicle and interpreter of texts to an illiterate society. I also note the degree of expertise demanded of the text-brokers through an analysis of ancient educational standards. I then connect these ancient figures to our modern context, noting parallels between our privilege as scholars, the diversity of our audience, and our impact upon them. Learning from the example of these text-brokers, I hope to advocate for an approach to education that recognizes and balances the demands of both expertise and accessibility in our fields.

**The Role of Text-Brokers**

Whether instructing students in the classroom or arbitrating a legal dispute in a judicial setting, the text-broker was the primary interpreter of the texts. Snyder explains that Jewish text-brokers were not academic in the cloistered sense we think of today, saying, “Their status as legal experts places them in a much more important civic role. Their deliberations and disputes might have had ramifications for their legal judgements, and so for the lives of actual people.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Jesus himself explicitly acknowledged the power of the scribes as one of the driving forces behind the push for his execution.[[6]](#footnote-6) As text-brokers, the scribes—not the Pharisees or Sadducees—were the only religious figures recorded to have been able to quote and interpret scripture within the gospels.[[7]](#footnote-7) They were often found in judicial settings, ready to give interpretations of the Law. One could refer to them as the expert witnesses. Nevertheless, as the primary textual interpreters, the text-brokers were also understood to be educators: “With one foot in the past and one in the present, the scribe serves as a point of access to tradition and literature for people who do not have leisure time or the skills for scholarly pursuits.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Balancing expertise with education, the text-broker must make his knowledge accessible.

In ancient Judea, scribal literacy, the pre-requisite for the text-broker position, was centered around the reading of the Torah.[[9]](#footnote-9) In a fragment of his *Hypothetica*, Philo describes the involvement of text-brokers in Jewish Sabbath readings, saying, “And indeed they do always assemble and sit together…But some priest who is present or one of the elders reads holy laws to them and expounds them point by point till about the late afternoon.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Outside the Temple, the synagogue was a setting for public reading within Hellenistic Judaism.[[11]](#footnote-11) When Jesus reinterprets scripture in the synagogue throughout the gospels,[[12]](#footnote-12) he does so in this same capacity as text-broker.[[13]](#footnote-13) Detailing every aspect of textual interaction, Snyder emphasizes the Lukan image of Jesus as text-broker:

Luke is quite explicit on the fact that Jesus unfolded and folded the book himself...Moreover, he locates the passage by himself: this was probably a more challenging operation than the actual reading, since it would involve the ability to skim text rather quickly and, presumably, in silence. Jesus opens, reads, and closes the roll, easily managing what for many would be a difficult feat of textual expertise. He is thereby shown to be an entirely self-sufficient handler and interpreter of texts. The act also has a larger symbolic value for the author: it is Jesus who opens, i.e., explains the scriptures and it is Jesus who represents their completion.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Nevertheless, Jesus’ textual authority does not go unchallenged—in both Matthew and Mark, the audience in Jesus’ hometown rejects his textual interpretation because his societal class precludes him from teaching—though not from reading.[[15]](#footnote-15) Even in Luke, where his portrayal places him squarely in the correct scribal-literate class, a displeased audience attempts to throw him over a cliff.[[16]](#footnote-16) Despite the privileged position of text-brokers, the acceptance of their interpretations was subject to the receptiveness of their audience.

This is especially well-attested in the surviving writings of the Hellenistic philosophers. In the classroom of Epictetus, for example, students would first encounter the text through their teacher’s reading and subsequent interpretation.[[17]](#footnote-17) These interpretations ranged from complete, nearly reverential endorsement of what was said to dismissal of the text and its author.[[18]](#footnote-18) Only after this text was introduced to the class did the students work with it on their own through a variety of writing exercises, including exegesis and rhetorical analysis.[[19]](#footnote-19) Though sometimes the instruction took place from a distance, in epistolary schools like Seneca’s, the text-broker’s role was to provide “*epanagignosis* or an ‘expert reading’” for his students.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**The Privileged Education of Ancient Text-Brokers**

For the ancient text-broker, gaining the necessary skills of the trade required years of training. Contrary to the views held by critics of William Harris’ oft-cited illiteracy rate, there is no evidence for a publicly-funded universal education system throughout most of the Roman empire.[[21]](#footnote-21) This did not mean that literacy couldn’t be self-taught. In some circumstances— especially within the papyri—there are examples of people who clearly learned to write primarily based on auditory lessons, or overhearing, instead of the training one would get at a school.[[22]](#footnote-22) On a more mundane level, the text-brokers’ curriculum, though by no means standardized, would have required intense focus and an excellent memory. They would have memorized much of their assigned corpus. Language barriers were also difficult to transcend, even among the literati. Snyder paraphrases Sedley to note that language was tricky even for the highly educated:

Platonists began to write commentaries because people in the Hellenistic period who spoke only Koine needed help with Classical Greek. Many students of philosophy were from a Latin-speaking background, and we have seen that Chrysippus’s Greek may have been a problem for them. If this relatively literate constituency needed extra help to assimilate Classical Greek, it is easy to imagine that the difficulties posed by Hebrew would have rendered scripture even more inaccessible to the average Aramaic-speaking auditor.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Language learning was a privilege based both on economic level and proximity to teachers who had some experience in the language of study.

Text-brokers also needed significant rhetorical training to adapt their interpretations.While some worked in synagogues and others in elite reading circles, text-brokers’ audiences could vary wildly. Discussing the role of Paul as text-broker, Snyder categorizes a diverse audience for the epistles, ranging from those unfamiliar with his words to faithful adherents of his message.[[24]](#footnote-24) Communicating to these different groups within a single literary work of interpretation would be difficult without experience. Fortunately, the rhetorical curriculum required students to practice rhetorical arguments by writing their own, often in the character of a well-known figure from history in a technique known as *prosopopoeia*.

**Modern Text-Broker Responsibilities**

Coming back to the present, we in this room can serve as modern-day text-brokers in our expertise and educative function. I am, however, wary of the potential to over-focus on the former qualification. How often do we take the time to acknowledge that we have had years of training in order to make it this far, to attain our positions, whatever they may be? There is often a high threshold of prerequisites in languages alone to even enter the study of religion. We are remarkably privileged to acquire a baseline knowledge of several languages within a matter of years—even more so to not be limited by proximity to a native speaker of the language we intend to study. Higher education itself remains a privilege as well, a fact I’m sure all of us are aware of, though the restrictions have loosened substantially since the Hellenistic world. We have training in forming arguments and communicating them in writing. We have access to libraries both physical and digital, along with the time required to take advantage of these resources. These are just a few of the privileges our modern education affords. Some of us are even lucky enough to be paid to do research on topics of our choice, devoting hours to reading the materials that interest us. I believe everyone in the room knows someone who would love to do the work we do, but they are kept from this field because of financial worries. May we never forget the privileged position in which we stand!

With these privileges come responsibilities, starting with considerations about our audience. By virtue of our attendance at this conference, I assume that everyone in the room believes their scholarly work to be, on some level, life-giving or otherwise illuminating to others. We include allusions to both delight the learned and to prove our expertise. However, we can become so involved in our insider culture that we can fail to welcome new scholars into our field, instead preferring to lightly nudge our pre-established friends with these references. Author Helen Sword describes yet another sort of inaccessibility rendered by academic literature:

There is a massive gap between what most readers consider to be good writing and what academics typically produce and publish…my research maps a scholarly universe in which wordy, wooden, weak-verbed academic prose finds few if any explicit advocates but vast armies of practitioners. The good news is that we all have the power to change the contours of that map, one publication at a time—if we choose to.[[25]](#footnote-25)

If we do not consider accessibility within our work, the ivory tower becomes an echo chamber. I wonder how often we shy away from explaining our work to others in our community. While quiet publication can make us less intimidating, I found the eagerness of my own academic community to talk about one’s own work on both introductory and critical levels to be engaging and approachable.I am also sensitive to the fact that the fears of sharing too much about one’s research are not completely unfounded. Within our denomination, I know of difficult, painful times in which faculty have been dismissed from positions or quietly asked to leave because their scholarship offended certain sensibilities within faith-based leadership. I understand that we fear some of those same tactics being used today. As someone early in her career, I too am anxious about crafting my scholarly image to serve as many people as possible through a teaching position someday, but if I dwell with that fear, it has the potential to paralyze me entirely. I have spent hours with my fingers hovering over a keyboard, unsure of a single thing I wish to say. I have even done so with this paper, nervously anticipating how to best connect with this audience. However, we cannot allow fear to govern our actions. Some scholars have told me that they don’t really care whether anyone outside their inner circle reads their writing—that they write only for themselves. While this is an understandable coping mechanism in a field where publications are elusive and rejection is common, it should not be the foundation of our thought as educators. Instead, we must remember our commitment to passing our knowledge on to our students and our peers.

Remembering Paul’s diverse audience, we can acknowledge that within our own classrooms there are varying levels of familiarity with religion. For some students and scholars, we are the first contact they have with Christianity as a whole, much less Adventism. Others may have complicated relationships with Adventism. This may also describe some in this room. Finally, there are the students and scholars who are passionate about both our community and the content of our teaching. It is our responsibility to make our message accessible to all three of these groups.

We have a final responsibility to consider: the impact of our work. Some scholars want to completely divorce the study of religion from any meaning or impact their findings could have on their audiences. In many ways, that is understandable. Words have often been taken out of context and books have histories of being used in malicious, sometimes horrific ways. However, that does not negate our responsibility to consider this aspect. As scholars of religion in a denominational society, we remain responsible to the community we have joined. Like the ancient Jewish text-brokers, we deal with real lives, though our legal expertise is rarely consulted. We mediate events in the past and the present for our students. Though we may sometimes grapple with our approach, our scholarly work often directly informs the practice and worldview of our audience.

In taking this standpoint, we will find ourselves in the company of other disciplines that take seriously the potential of their fields to affect the world around them. Regarding cultural studies, Stuart Hall characterizes its practice as “a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference”.[[26]](#footnote-26) This is true in the study of culture and religion is one of the most dynamic cultural forces. Furthermore, in the field of education, Henry Giroux says, “Pedagogy is not simply about the social construction of knowledge, value, and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among educators, audiences, texts, and institutional formations.”[[27]](#footnote-27) If they can do it, so can we.

**Conclusion**

At the start of this paper, I posited that ancient text-brokers might have much to teach us as modern scholars of religion. After a grueling educational process, they operated in a variety of settings, but their functions were the same as ours: they carried and interpreted texts to diverse audiences. They recognized the impact that they had and acted accordingly. Like the text-brokers, we have a privileged vocation, one which has allowed us time and settings ideal for reading, writing, and teaching about religious materials. However, we do not take these responsibilities as seriously as we ought. Some among us, myself included, have retreated into elite academic circles. We can do better by acknowledging our privilege, considering our audience, and being intentional about the impacts of our scholarship.

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1. Chris Keith, *Jesus’ Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee*, Library of New Testament Studies 413 (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 73-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. H. Gregory Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World: Philosophers, Jews and Christians*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2010), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Snyder, *Texts*, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 182-183. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Keith, *Literacy*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Philo’s *Hypothetica* 7.13, cited in Snyder, *Texts*, 181

    . [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mt 13:54-58, Mk 6:1-6, and Lk 4:14-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. On the subject of Jesus’ literacy, Keith, *Literacy*, 188, notes, “The sources portray a Jesus who is not a scribal-literate teacher, a Jesus who was, and a Jesus who confused individuals on the matter…The Markan portrayal of Jesus as a τέκτων who is outside the scribal-literate class but nevertheless occupies social positions associated with scribal literacy, and meets various receptions for doing so, most clearly reflects the actual past. Similarly, the Johannine claim that Jesus was assumed to be uneducated, but was able to force at least some of his audiences to re-assess those assumptions, has a high degree of historical plausibility. Matthew maintains the rejection of Jesus in his hometown, but transitions Jesus away from direct identification with the scribal-illiterate manual-labor class and towards scribal pedagogical authority. Luke completes the transition towards scribal literacy by presenting Jesus as a fully legitimate scribal-literate synagogue teacher.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Snyder, *Texts*, 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Keith, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Snyder, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Keith, *Literacy*, 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. P.Corn Inv. I 11 is a letter from a woman, Thermouthis, to her husband Nemesion. The errors she makes demonstrate an auditory understanding of the language. For more information, see Ann Ellis Hanson, “Papyri and Efforts by Adults in Egyptian Villages to Write Greek,” in *Learning Latin and Greek From Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Elizabeth P. Archibald, William Brockliss, and Jonathan Gnoza, Yale Classical Studies 37 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 10-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Snyder, *Texts*, 186-187. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid, 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1 and 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its *Theoretical Legacies*” in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Henry A. Giroux, “Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy, and the Responsibility of Intellectuals.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2004): 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)