

# What is it about the book? Touching and being touched by the Word of God

Paper presented to the Global Seminar on “Sensations: Religious mediations and the formation of identities,” Accra, Ghana 15-18 August, 2009

Associate Prof Peter Horsfield

RMIT University, Melbourne.

## ***Abstract***

The most common referent for the term “The Word of God” when referring to the Christian Bible today is to the textual content – the words and their meaning as mediators of the intention of God. But from very early in Christian history, the medium of the writings has been seen as having physical power as well. This paper provides some historical instances and perspectives on this artifactual construction, including the importance of the codex form in the canonization process of Christian scripture, magical uses of the artifact, and illumination of the text as a construction of holiness.

## ***Introduction***

- Working on historical perspectives, 2-4<sup>th</sup> centuries. Construction of Christian bible.
- Variety of uses of bible – material practices. Not mentioned in church histories or bibles courses. All connected with the bible as a book – the niggling question – What is it about the book?
- It is content-generated meaning that we are most familiar with when we speak of the bible as the word of God – the signification of the text. What I want to explore is the ways in which the book of the bible is understood as the word of God with little apparent reference to the details of the words of its content – what we might call the signification of the book.<sup>1</sup>
- Another dimension in this is Matthew Engelke observation that “Christianity is often referred to as a ‘religion of the book’ but strangely enough not also a ‘religion of readers’.”
- Let me first indicate some of the instances, and then some of the reflections on them.

## **Material form - the role of the codex**

- Early Christian adoption of the papyrus codex form was an important factor in the development of Christian scriptures into a book. All papyrus gospel fragments that have survived from the early centuries have been from codices.
- Codex form developed several hundred years earlier
  - Used in Graeco-Roman society, but primarily as a notebook or for pocket editions.
  - Not considered suitable for literary purposes- scroll considered more appropriate.

---

<sup>1</sup> Engelke, M. (2009). "Reading and time: Two approaches to the materiality of scripture." *Ethnos* 74(2): 151-174.

- Christian use of the codex form rather than the scroll was an important identity marker and set Christians apart culturally from other groups such as Jews, other imperial religions, and the literati, who didn't adopt the codex for literary purposes until several centuries later.
- A number of factors have been identified for Christian adoption of the codex in their writing.
  - suited the type of anthologized material of Christian literature, such as collections of letters and gospels;
  - could be written on two sides of the page so that 2-3 scrolls could be integrated into one book,
  - made it more economical to use and less bulky for travelers and teachers to carry;
  - its page-turning facility made it easier to use and refer to when one was in debates or a speaking situation.
  - There's a strong case that the codex was the material form of an early edition of the letters of Paul, which had been gathered together in a number of collections and were being circulated and being used as authoritative documents. So "the authority of its content carried over to the kind of book in which it was transcribed, and thus the codex was powerfully promoted as the standard form of the Christian book."<sup>2</sup>
  - Mitchell sees the widespread Christian use of the codex as "a distinctive mark on material culture in the realm of books."<sup>3</sup>
  - A martyr story from the second century of six Christians from a small North African village who were summoned to the Roman Proconsul for refusing to sacrifice to the Emperor. When they came and appeared before him, the leader of the Christians had with him a codex form of Paul's letters translated into Latin. (The Proconsul pleaded with them to disavow their faith, and when they didn't he was forced to kill them.)

## Authorisation and artifact.

- As part of Constantine's fourth century church building program, Constantine commissioned a large number of new bibles to be produced for placement in those churches. The contract was given to Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea in the following terms:
- *I have thought it expedient to instruct your Intelligence that you should command to be written fifty volumes on prepared vellum, easy to read and conveniently portable, by professional scribes with an exact understanding of their craft – volumes, that is to say, of the Holy Scriptures, the provision and use of which is, as you are aware, most necessary for the instruction of the church. Letters have been dispatched from our Clemency to the accountant of the province, advising him to supply everything requisite for the production of*

---

<sup>2</sup> Gamble, H. Y. (1995). Books and readers in the early church: A history of early Christian texts. New Haven, Yale University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, M. (2006). The emergence of the written record. The Cambridge History of Christianity. M. Mitchell and F. Young. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. **1: Origins to Constantine: 177-194.**

*the books, and it will be your care to ensure that they are prepared as quickly as possible. Using the authority of this letter you should commandeer two public carriages for their transport, for by such means will these fine volumes be most readily brought before our eyes, this duty being performed by one of the deacons of your church, who on reaching our presence will experience our liberality.*<sup>4</sup>

- The Emperor's bible project had a number of consequences.
  - Established "the book" as an integral feature of the visual and material space and character of Christianity.
    - Whereas previously most churches would have bits and pieces of copies of the scriptures, the book project consolidated these into a single book.
    - Stimulated other cities and civic bodies to commission similar copies of the whole Bible, to be placed in their churches as a matter of prestige.
    - Developed a perception of the Scriptures not just as a book of inspiration and devotion but also as an artifact, to be decorated and put on display for observation and adoration.
  - It established what the Christian "book" would be – the material production of the bible closed the book on the book!
    - Debate about the canon had been going on for several centuries but no official church council had produced a definitive list.
    - The Emperor's bibles settled the canon. From that point on, no bishop would have dared used any other writings as scripture apart from those used in the Emperor's bibles.
    - Terminology about Christian writings changed. "Where before scholars had spoken of 'authentic,' 'spurious,' 'genuine,' and 'disputed' writings, now the terminology is dominated by two opposing terms: 'canonical' (legal) and 'non-canonical' (illegal)." <sup>5</sup>

## Reading the book.

- The literate were a small minority of Christian followers – possibly 5-15%
  - Christians had been encouraged to read the scriptures privately at least since the writing of Hippolytus (around 200).
  - A market had developed in alternative reading materials, leading to concerns expressed about what Christians were reading privately and attempts to destroy writings considered heretical to prevent their ideas from spreading.
  - Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century probably reflects the greatest paranoia by advocating that "What is not read in the church should not be read privately." (*Catech 4:36*).
- The effect of reading the holy writings was seen as being independent of understanding. Origen encouraged Christians to read the scriptures at home for at least a couple of hours a

<sup>4</sup> Herklots, H. G. G. (1994). "Discovering the oldest New Testaments." Christian History 43(XIII,3): 34-37.

<sup>5</sup> Dungan, D. L. (2006). Constantine's bible: Politics and the making of the New Testament. London, SCM press.

day, though he did acknowledge that for the average reader the scriptures could be dull and obscure. Nevertheless he encouraged them to persist “since even the sound of sacred words in the ear is beneficial even if you do not understand the sense.” (*Hom in Nave Jesu 20.1*)

- The illiterate though were also familiar with the text
  - Regular public reading a part of Christian worship from the earliest times
  - Made it possible for the illiterate to become familiar with biblical content and even to memorize extensive passages.
  - The text was also reinforced in stories represented visually in drawings, paintings and mosaics.
  - There was active involvement in the text, even by the illiterate
    - Story in a letter written by Augustine to Jerome. In his translation of the Book of Jonah into Latin, Jerome used the word ivy to describe the bush that Jonah rested under, rather than the word in the Greek text, gourd. Augustine in his letter relays to Jerome a furor that this change of word had sparked:  
*A certain bishop, one of our brethren, having introduced in the church over which he presides the reading of your version, came upon a word in the book of the prophet Jonah, of which you have given a very different rendering from that which had been of old familiar to the senses and memory of all the worshippers, and had been chanted for so many generations in the church. Jonah 4:6. Thereupon arose such a tumult in the congregation, especially among the Greeks, correcting what had been read, and denouncing the translation as false, that the bishop was compelled to ask the testimony of the Jewish residents (it was in the town of Oea). These, whether from ignorance or from spite, answered that the words in the Hebrew manuscripts were correctly rendered in the Greek version, and in the Latin one taken from it. What further need I say? The man was compelled to correct your version in that passage as if it had been falsely translated, as he desired not to be left without a congregation—a calamity which he narrowly escaped. (Epis 71.3)*
    - Reminds me of the significant reaction when the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published in 1952, whether the new translation had validity. In Australia, where the debate made the newspapers, one writer to the editor berated the new translation and stated categorically that we should leave the bible in the language God wrote it in.
  - Even though clergy in the Catholic stream kept a strict control on worship leadership from late in the second century on, congregations were far from passive observers. The knowledge they gained through auditory and visual sources enabled the illiterate to actively engage in debates. There is one description of Augustine’s congregation in Hippo, in the North of Africa:
    - *Augustine’s congregation were in the habit of reacting to whatever was read or preached with all the liveliness of their temperament. They shouted comments, sighed, laughed, like children at the cinema. When a few stereotyped expressions occurred such as “Have mercy on us,” or at the word Confiteor, or at “Forgive us our trespasses” in the Our Father, they made a*

*practice of very audibly beating their breasts. When the speaker made some telling remark they loudly acclaimed him, and protested as loudly when there was anything in his utterances of which they disapproved.<sup>6</sup>*

## Embossing the artifact.

- As educated classes were increasingly attracted to Christianity, they brought with them into their practice of faith their literate interests and practices
  - This included collecting books, not only for private reading but also for display.
  - Their book displays included full copies of the Christian scriptures, and a market developed to meet that demand.
  - May have been a cause of attraction of Christianity as a religion that it had a book, both to the cultured elite and to the illiterate, though for different reasons.
  - Although as both Webb Keane<sup>7</sup> and Matthew Engelke<sup>8</sup> note, in some modern African settings the fact that Christianity was based on the book as a material object was a stumbling block.
  - Keane notes that among the Sumbanese, the fact that they were illiterate was an indication that they should remain *marapu* rather than become Christian. The materiality of the Bible was also a factor: As one priest observed, *“But those Christians, all they have is a book. This book can be destroyed, or again its handiwork can fade.”*<sup>9</sup>
- The materiality of their traditional religion was more permanent: gold and tombs.
- A number were critical of the extent of this embossing and decoration of the bible.
  - John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople, (347-407):  
*... for they tie up their books, and keep them always put away in cases, and all their care is for the fineness of the parchments, and the beauty of the letters, not for reading them. For they have not bought them to obtain advantage and benefit from them, but take pains about such matters to show their wealth and pride. Such is the excess of vainglory. I do not hear any one glory that he knows the contents, but that he has a book written in letters of gold. And what gain, tell me, is this? The Scriptures were not given us for this only, that we might have them in books, but that we might engrave them on our hearts. (Hom 32)*
  - Jerome (347-420) in several of his letters was also critical of the indulgence with which the scriptures and other Christian writings were being produced and the excessive concern with the appearance of the scriptures rather than their content: “Parchments are dyed purple, gold is melted into lettering, manuscripts are decked with jewels, while Christ lies at the door naked and dying.” (Ep 32) In another,

---

<sup>6</sup> Meer, F. v. d. (1962). *Augustine the bishop; the life and work of a father of the church.* London, New York,, Sheed and Ward.

<sup>7</sup> Keane, W. (2007). *Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter.* Berkeley, University of California Press.

<sup>8</sup> Engelke, M. (2007). *A problem of presence: Beyond scripture in an African church.* Berkeley, University of California Press.

<sup>9</sup> Keane, p.191

written to a woman who had asked for advice on how to raise her daughter, Jerome cautions about not being distracted by the decorated form in which the scriptures were being produced: “Let her treasures be not silks or gems but manuscripts of the holy scriptures; and in these let her think less of gilding, and Babylonian parchment, and arabesque patterns, than of correctness and accurate punctuation.” (*Ep 107.12*)

### **The book as defence against evil.**

- John Chrysostom, described the scriptures as “divine charms,” and refers without criticism to the popular practice and conviction that “the devil will not dare approach a house where a Gospel book is lying, much less will any spirit or any sort of sin ever touch or enter a soul which bears about with it such sentiments as it contains.” (*Hom in Joh 32*)
  - Chrysostom also supports another popular view that hanging the gospel on one’s bed, with an adjacent coffer in which to place money, was an effective defence against the devil. (*Hom in Ep1 ad Cor 43.7*).
- The practice of carrying scripture verses around one’s neck as amulets appears to have been widespread practice.
  - John Chrysostom 4<sup>th</sup> century refers to the practice as a popular one.
  - Small extracts of scripture written on small pieces of papyri for this purpose have been found.
  - The practice was apparently sufficiently widespread that the Council of Laodicea in 360 explicitly forbade clergy from following the practice.  
*They who are of the priesthood, or of the clergy, shall not be magicians, enchanters, mathematicians, or astrologers; nor shall they make what are called amulets, which are chains for their own souls. And those who wear such, we command to be cast out of the Church.* (*Canon 36*)

### **As a health cure.**

- The theologian Augustine considered it permissible in case of a headache to sleep with a copy of the Gospel of John under one’s pillow.<sup>10</sup>
- Smalley quotes instances of prophets in African Independent Churches today holding a bible over people’s heads as part of a healing ceremony.

### **Bibliomancy and fortune telling.**

- Seeking divine guidance or an omen by randomly opening the text of scripture and blindly selecting a passage was, and remains, a common practice.
- A variety of instances from the 4<sup>th</sup> and later centuries where either the chance overhearing of a text was taken as a personal omen, or a scriptural book randomly consulted for a personal directive or message or prediction, a Christian adaptation of a fairly widespread cultural practice (cf. Augustine)

---

<sup>10</sup> Gamble, H. Y. (1995). Books and readers in the early church: A history of early Christian texts. New Haven, Yale University Press.

- This remains a common practice common today. I was told a story in Sunday School designed to put me off it, of a man who went looking for messages from the bible by randomly putting his finger on a place and received the following three messages: – “And Judas went out and hanged himself.” “Go and do thou likewise.” “What you are going to do, do quickly.”
- Used for fortune telling.
  - Some surviving texts show an adaptation of an ancient Greek oracle book known as the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, which provided a list of questions and sets of numbers linked to bible verses from which one drew an answer.
  - Augustine expresses the opinion in one of his epistles, “I do not like this custom,” though he adds, “Although it could be wished that they do this rather than run around consulting demons.” (*Ep 55.37*)

### As a spiritual weapon.

- We're all familiar with the holding up of the bible book in popular portrayals of exorcisms.
- Smalley gives a recent example of Haitians who enact curses by tearing a page out of the bible that contains verses of curses, generally one of the cursed Psalms, boiling the page in water to make a tea, and giving it to a person against whom they have a grudge. According to Smallet, the curse is considered to be more potent if the text is in French rather than Haitian translation of the bible, because the power is greater in an international language.<sup>11</sup>

### Protecting the book through curses and anathema

- Extensive practices of protecting the book through curses and anathemas
  - Reasons: enormous energy that went into transcription, also the cost, also perceived holiness and protection of the holiness of the text.
  - The care of books became part of the rule of many monasteries
- One was against damaging the artifact
  - Third Council of Constantinople passed a canon which declared a year's excommunication for anyone who injures the book of the Old or New Testament, or cuts them up, or gives them to book dealers to be erased.
  - Written curses in bibles included threats of excommunication, leprosy, condemnation to hell, having their eyes put out.
  - An 11<sup>th</sup> century edition (Abbey of St Peter in Salzburg) which includes the words *To the bearer of the keys of heaven the Curator Parholt who made this book offers it with joyful heart that it may be an expiation for all sins committed by him. May he who steals it suffer violent bodily pains.*
  - A 1461 text had simply, *Hanging will do for him who steals you.*<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Keane, W. (2007). Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter. Berkeley, University of California Press.

<sup>12</sup> Droggin, M. (1983). Medieval scribes and the history of book curses. Monclair, Allanheld and Schram.

- Another was changing the text
  - The Book of revelation
 

*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon."* (22:18-20)

## Analysis

What underlies the shift of power from the words in their meaning to the power of the artifact? A number of dimensions can be explored.

### The transition from oral to literate words

- An effect of the transference from the transience of the spoken word to the permanence of the written word.
  - A shift from power inherent in the spoken words to power in the external object.
  - A sensory shift from the word heard to the word seen – in material form.
  - The power of the speaker in the speaking is transferred to the words recorded.
  - The living nature of the spoken word is transferred to the written word, so that the bible becomes a living text. David Morgan in his *Lure of Images* speaks of the visual reproduction of text as “A visual performance of what is heard. Seeing is reading is hearing.” A conflation of the media.

### The question of presence

- The shift from speech to writing also raises the question of recreating presence.
- In writing, the transience of speech is made permanent in the word written. But how do you transfer the physical stimulation and comfort of the oratorical performance to the passive and dispassionate genre of the written word.
  - For the literate person, could be accessed through content.
  - For the worship leader, through performance.
  - For others, it is through performance of the materiality. If speech is performative action, what is done here is perform the material text – meaning shifts from the meaning of individual words of the text to the meaning of the text as a whole
- Matthew Englehard: The Bible’s materiality is a good indication of how presence can be indexed in and through physical objects.
  - E.g. fundamentalists carrying the bible is as much about presence as it is about representation.
- This picks up Marianne Sawicki’s analysis of the biblical oral prophets cf. literate teachers.

### Power of the fetish

- Anthropologists will understand the nature and function of the fetish better than I do.

- The object as power.
  - Power of the thing represented or symbolized is present in the object.
  - Content of the text matters only in an attributive way – it is enough that the textual meaning is related holistically rather than particularly.
    - For that reason, the power works whether the person can read it or not, understands it or not.
- The power of the written is enhanced in a situation where texts were esoteric objects, not fully understood, and therefore surrounded by mystique.
  - “If spoken words were powerful, so were inscribed words, for they had the advantage of duration and secrecy.” Gamble, 237.
  - Links to common magic formulae, where a particular word or combination of words is believed to have an intrinsic power that could be used to the advantage of the user.
- The power inherent in the object is a factor of the sanctity, authority and power of the “divine” words they contain.
  - So the power is not the power of the words on the page but the embodiment of the power of the idea or the speaker.

## Power relationships in performance of the word

- Access to actual reading of the scriptures has been strictly controlled throughout Christian history.
  - It is the elite who perform the word in the reading. Having control of the book is a significant source of power and establishment of the clerical office.
- How do the non-elite access or “activate” the word?
  - The material religious practices of the book can be seen as a subversive act or resistance against the clerical power?

## Theological constructions

- In what ways does the material nature of the word become the word of God?
  - Reconstitution from a material word to an immaterial spiritual revelation
    - Facilitated by non-literal practices of reading –
    - The allegorical in particular looks for historical continuities across books
    - Facilitates engagement with the material book as allegorical rather than literal material
  - Note the interplay of words and the word - the linguistic shift come from the “words” to the “word” of God – from singular to plural.
  - A reflection of what Derrida talks about as the difference between the book and writing – The text is regarded as a fact of literary history or container of information and signs characterized by difference – the book also has a “function as a sign itself of a sense of meaning as homogenous, present as a totality.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Gellrich, J. (1985). The idea of the book in the Middle Ages. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

- What are the implications of attributing God's communication from words of revelation to "the" word?
- In general understanding, the word of God comes through reading and hearing the words of the content and building a meaning from the passages.
  - It becomes the word of God through a transformation of the literal text into a divine sub-text – from text to discourse.
  - A transformation from everyday language and description and proscription into God's word – a medium of personal communication between the eternal God and the individual.
  - Augustine: the bible is the word of God in material form that has immaterial qualities unlike other objects.
- Theologically, the meaning of the text is operating at two levels: the realistic and the theological. This allows for a fairly easy transfer of material realism into a supernatural immateriality.

### ***In sum***

A great fluidity in boundaries between the material and immaterial, between text and material form, in the play between literal and allegorical.

Given this transition between material realism and immaterial idealism, doesn't it make sense that the material may be equally valid a medium of the divine as the realistic text?

Is verbal text the only medium capable of spiritual transparency?

Drogin, M. (1983). Medieval scribes and the history of book curses. Monclair, Allanheld and Schram.

Dungan, D. L. (2006). Constantine's bible: Politics and the making of the New Testament. London, SCM press.

Engelke, M. (2007). A problem of presence: Beyond scripture in an African church. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Engelke, M. (2009). "Reading and time: Two approaches to the materiality of scripture." Ethnos 74(2): 151-174.

Gamble, H. Y. (1995). Books and readers in the early church: A history of early Christian texts. New Haven, Yale University Press.

Gellrich, J. (1985). The idea of the book in the Middle Ages. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Herklotz, H. G. G. (1994). "Discovering the oldest New Testaments." Christian History 43(XIII,3): 34-37.

Keane, W. (2007). Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Meer, F. v. d. (1962). Augustine the bishop; the life and work of a father of the church. London, New York, Sheed and Ward.

Mitchell, M. (2006). The emergence of the written record. The Cambridge History of Christianity. M. Mitchell and F. Young. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1: **Origins to Constantine**: 177-194.