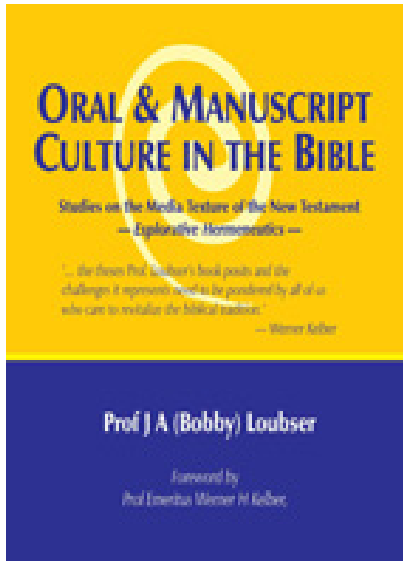


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Loubser, J. A. (Bobby)

Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible: Studies on the Media Texture of the New Testament—Explorative Hermeneutics

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This volume (published just prior to Prof. Loubser's untimely death last year) is an important addition to the growing number of studies that approach biblical texts in light of ancient compositional and media realities. Loubser's core concern in this wide-ranging study is to describe the manuscript medium as the outcome of a complex convergence of oral, writing, and memory practices.

In the first chapter Loubser argues that, to avoid construing ancient texts in contemporary literary frames of reference, interpreters need to be aware of both the constraints and the opportunities afforded by ancient media. The New Testament documents are products of an oral/aural and manuscript media environment. While the cultural contexts for biblical texts had long moved away from the pure orality of traditional societies, ancient writing largely served the purposes of oral enactment and as an external prop for texts based in memory. Developments in Semitic and Greek alphabets facilitated the transition from the highly specialized literacy of the "scribal culture" of the ancient Near East and Egypt to the "manuscript culture" of the Greek and Roman worlds, characterized by the use of writing for intellectual and cultural expression on a grander scale. Nevertheless, literacy remained restricted, and the manuscript medium in its various permutations continued to be embedded in oral and memory-based utilization practices.

In chapter 2 Loubser applies communication systems theory to media dynamics. This chapter constitutes the heart of the book and likewise an important contribution to the contemporary discussion of media approaches within biblical scholarship. A system, as Loubser describes it, is a set of elements related to one another in such a way that it maintains or supports regulated processes. Communication may be analyzed as a systems process involving living senders and receivers. The purpose of the system is transmission of information, with feedback loops that permit the adjustment of the message to the audience. The written text that biblical scholarship tends to take as its exclusive focus is just one aspect of more encompassing communication systems. In other words, texts ought not to be identified *per se* with the total event of communication; rather, they are active components within a system of communication, forming the physical and visible substratum of the actual message. In addition to its purely conceptual elements, which similarly have tended to be central to scholarly analysis, the message makes implicit and explicit reference to numerous linguistic and cultural codes such as genre and canon. Medium is another critical aspect of the message, for it is the configuration of physical elements (including orality and aurality), determined by the technology of communication, that *mediates* the coherent exchange of information. Medium is the configuration of vectors, inclusive of such things as script, voice, memory, social contexts, and format (e.g., scrolls, codices), that are operative in the storage, retrieval, and utilization of information. Media can be assessed and differentiated in terms of qualities such as viscosity and durability, which are measures of the amount of distortion a message embodied in a particular medium experiences over time. Orality, for example, is a low viscosity medium, writing a high viscosity medium. Media, of course, may be mixed, as in the oral enactment from memory of a written message (manuscript).

Because a medium along with its associated practices and norms remains relatively stable over time, its role within communication becomes invisible and cognitively engrained (another way of saying this is that it is difficult to gain critical distance from the communications system that is the basis for the articulation of thought). Biblical scholarship, Loubser points out, is notoriously deficient in media awareness, and thus it tends to project modern media dynamics—especially notions of individual, solitary authors and readers—upon the ancient messages embodied in the biblical texts. In antiquity, oral and social contextualization was key to the *emergence* and *transmission* of a written composition. Accordingly, the boundaries of the written text itself were indistinct, opening out to the wider oral-traditional register. Loubser, in fact, questions whether we can rightly assume the existence of a “self-conscious literate identity” (72) behind each of the texts of the New Testament.

In the remaining chapters Loubser shifts to applications of media criticism to the biblical world and, more particularly, the world of early Christianity. Ancient literacy, he notes,

rather than displacing orality, just modified its effects. The Gospels and the Epistles were not bounded, self-contained literary texts, as they tend to be interpreted today; rather, they opened out to oral and memory dimensions, to the more encompassing biosphere of tradition. In a convincing exercise in acoustic mapping, Loubser shows that Luke 9:51–52 retains an oral substratum (effaced in translations that approach the text in wholly literary terms) still constitutive of its oral activation from its base in the written Gospel medium. Another implication of the openness of the boundaries of written texts to the wider oral-memorial register is that Paul's Epistles would have had a living, allusive relationship to Gospel traditions (as opposed to the explicit citation that strictly literary approaches typically take as evidence for knowledge of Jesus tradition in the Pauline communities). Loubser contends in a similar vein that rhetorical criticism of the New Testament needs to overcome its literate bias by approaching rhetorical techniques not just as methods for literary composition but as indications of the larger oral world of ancient communication.

Moving in a decidedly (and, for this reviewer, sometimes over-reaching) McLuhanesque direction, Loubser argues for the thoroughgoing effects of an "oral mentality" upon the conceptual dimensions of biblical texts. Not just the composition and reception of Paul's letters but also his theology was orally contextualized; that is, it was conceptually influenced by the performance dynamic of the manuscript medium in which his letters were articulated. Paul's letters, as is now widely recognized, were not composed to be read separately apart from their social contextualization in oral performance. This is a major contributing factor in giving Paul's theology its unsystematic and situational character. However, Loubser goes on to argue that Paul's interiorizing, "in Christ/Christ in us" theology is the expression of the oral mentality, more precisely, of the cognitive centrality of oral memory that was a key component of ancient communication. Likewise, the doctrine of the Spirit's presence in the Johannine literature is the expression of the oral focus upon the immediate presence of the word. Loubser also attempts to find contemporary analogies for oral theologies in the innovative Christologies of presence characteristic of some African indigenous churches.

Inevitably for a work this ambitious in its claims and applications, a few points for criticism arise. Chief among these is in fact Loubser's positing of an oral mentality in the strong, epistemologically determinative sense, then deriving from it various theological and conceptual features of early Christianity. Not only does this seem an unwelcome throwback to orality/literacy dualism and the related tendency to make orality explain too much, it is belied by Loubser's own analysis of Greco-Roman antiquity as a *mixed*-media culture and the manuscript medium itself being integrally comprised of the co-existent operations of writing, orality, and memory. In the same vein, Loubser at times so emphasizes orality and the subordination of writing to the spoken word that early

Christian texts frequently seem to be little more than epiphenomenal of oral processes. Despite the clear focus in certain parts of the book upon the distinctiveness of media properties, only occasionally does Loubser consider the perhaps far-reaching effects of the written medium upon the oral-memorial communications environment. In other words, Loubser makes just preliminary gestures toward the thoroughgoing *interfacial* model that would seem to be entailed by his own media analysis.

Stylistically speaking, the many redundancies (which, however, have useful reinforcing effects) that the reader encounters suggest that the chapters originated as separate studies that have been only roughly integrated within the present volume. Moreover, specific arguments and claims are sometimes worked out only inchoately, as though in draft form. Nevertheless, Loubser has made a critical contribution to curing biblical scholarship, in his words, of its “media blindness.” Media criticism is not just one more entry into a scholarly field already crowded with various “approaches.” Rather, it deals directly and fundamentally with the media assumptions that supply the cognitive frameworks within which all biblical scholarship occurs.