Dan Nässelqvist

Public Reading in Early Christianity: Lectors, Manuscripts, and Sound in the Oral Delivery of John 1–4

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Dan Nässelqvist, senior lecturer at Lund University, offers an important entry in the study of early Christian media culture with this 2016 publication. This is a reworking and expansion of his 2014 Lund dissertation under Samuel Byrskog and Magnus Zetterholm, “Public Reading and Aural Intensity: An Analysis of the Soundscape in John 1–4.” The book deserves wide reading and discussion of its methods and contributions.

Werner Kelber’s The Oral and the Written Gospel (1983) began to problematize the print-culture assumptions of the study of the New Testament. To make his point and its paradigm-shifting impact clearer, Kelber described an exaggerated bifurcation between print and oral cultures. In a post-Gutenberg context, our primary interaction with a tradition is through a mass-produced printed text. There is one “original” disembodied text, identical to other copies, that readers interact with individually and, for the most part, silently. New Testament texts, however, were produced by scribes embedded in an oral culture where the primary interaction with a tradition was an embodied performance of that tradition, sometimes in a public reading. Over time, communities experience multiple and varying performances of the same tradition. The sharp distinction between print and oral cultures rightly drew criticism as a “Great Divide” that Kelber himself later recalibrated. Biblical performance criticism (BPC), developed out of Kelber’s insights, has struggled to be free of binary thinking that then perhaps served rhetorical purposes to
wake up a scholarly guild from its media assumptions but now undermines the insights offered by a more complex understanding of the interrelated dynamics of different media within a particular culture.

In the introductory chapter, Nässelqvist ably exposes the binary thinking of some BPC practitioners who perpetuate this either/or thinking. They argue that early Christians primarily memorized material, performed it standing without manuscripts, with gestures, vocal expression, and facial expressions—suggesting that public reading was a performance comparable to ancient drama and oratory (12). Nässelqvist builds on the studies of ancient manuscript cultures by William A. Johnson, Harry Y. Gamble, Raffaella Cribiore, Raymond J. Starr, and Roger S. Bagnall to show that this portrayal is inaccurate. Rather than a binary choice between vocalized and corporate versus silent and individual reading, the primary distinction in the first-century Roman Empire was between public and private reading, and public reading was distinct from drama and oratory. Greek and Roman cities depended on practiced lectors who read directly from manuscripts.

Chapter 2, “Pragmatics of Reading,” analyzes the practical aspects of reading from a codex or scroll. The format, handwriting, abbreviations, and lectional signs of a codex or book roll indicate an aspect of a manuscript culture, or “the social norms about the production and characteristics of manuscripts” (18). They suggest that Greeks and Romans “deliberately chose to produce literary manuscripts that called for highly skilled readers” (26). Only a few could read a text aloud impromptu; most would extensively prepare to read fluently. Some have argued that the codex, popular among early Christians, was easier to read aloud, but cognitive studies suggest that the single broad columns of codices are more difficult to read than the multiple narrow columns of a book roll (30). Nässelqvist studies manuscripts P46, P66, and P75 to test his conclusions and shows that abbreviations such as nomina sacra and other so-called reader’s aids do not aid reading aloud but in fact make it more difficult (appendices 1–6). As indicators of a specifically Christian reading culture, they may aid a lector’s preparation, especially a weak reader’s interpretation of the text.

Chapter 3, “Lectors in Early Christian Communities,” investigates the sociocultural aspects of readers in the Greek and Roman world, especially the “professional” reader, the lector. Christian communities quickly adopted the codex as their preferred media and weekly devoted time to read their books aloud, requiring the skills of lectors, often slaves who were trained by the elite to read aloud with fitting vocal expression. Texts in Greece and Rome were often read in reading communities, at dinners, and at public recitals. Descriptions and images suggest that lectors were seated on a chair or stool, holding a book roll or codex in both hands (73–74). Since it was a two-handed operation, a lector had little ability to use gestures. Although delivery of a memorized text was important
during education, public reading aloud was most often from manuscripts, which implies that memorization was unnecessary (75). Preparation, however, was necessary to meet the expectations of elite audiences who anticipated “clear, faultless, and appropriate pronunciation and vocal expression of the text” (85). Irenaeus (Haer. 3.7.1–2) criticizes a lector who misphrased a reading from Paul that led to misinterpretation (88). The importance of a clear reading led to the establishment of the office of the lector in the early church.

Chapter 4, “A Method of Sound Analysis,” shifts the book in a different direction. Moving away from a description of Christian reading culture, Nässelqvist asks whether it is possible to detect from the Greek text of the New Testament clues that a lector would use to prepare a fitting public reading. Here he refines the sound-mapping methods pioneered by Margaret Ellen Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott. The idea is that a public reading creates a linear stream of sound for an audience. By investigating which sounds and patterns of sound are pleasing to a particular culture, it may be possible to discover how a lector in that culture may choose to interpret the text. Nässelqvist draws on Dionysius Thrax (second century BCE), pseudo-Demetrius (second century BCE), the anonymous Rhetorica ad Herennium (first century BCE), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (first century BCE), Cicero (first century BCE), and Quintilian (first century CE) as primary resources to reconstruct which sounds and patterns were culturally valuable.

The method involves five steps that are helpfully outlined in appendix 9: delimiting cola, identifying periods, identifying sound patterns, describing the sound quality, and analyzing aural intensity. A colon is a statement that can be uttered in a single breath. A period is an artistic arrangement of cola that connects the end of the period to its beginning by sound or syntax. Sound patterns may include repetition or variation of sounds, words, or themes. Sound qualities are sounds that are pleasing or dissonant to an audience; Greek and Roman authors often found clashes of vowels (hiatus), hissing sounds, and clashes of consonants disagreeable. The final step aggregates the above features to classify a passage as either high, medium, or low aural intensity. Nässelqvist suggests that passages with high aural intensity are ones that an ancient lector would likely have emphasized in reading aloud and that an audience may have found to be most significant.

Chapters 5–8 apply this method of sound mapping to John 1–4, respectively. Some of the insights discovered through this method include: the vowel and consonant clashes and hissing sounds in Jesus’s question to Nathaniel (John 1:50) suggests a doubtful, dismissive, or even antagonistic tone (230). Transitions between sections in John 2 are marked with changes in aural intensity, and each section has at least one passage emphasized by a rise in intensity (247–48). Cola of John 3 with high aural intensity accentuate the difference
between those who believe in Jesus and those who do not (275). John 4 uses thematic words to help listeners navigate abrupt changes in the dialogue and recognize important features, such as the shift from “husband” to “worship” (318). The results are tantalizing and point to future research using this refined method.

A clear and helpful chapter 9, “Conclusions and Implications,” summarizes each chapter and its conclusions. Nässelqvist suggests research on other texts using his proposed sound-mapping technique and analyzing the relationship of style and delivery, a topic he announced in the introduction was beyond the scope of this study.

I commend this insightful book to anyone interested in reading, manuscript culture, performance, and related topics, as it is certainly a milestone in our growing understanding of the media dynamics of early Christianity. It presents important ancient evidence and thoughtful argumentation for how texts were read aloud, who read them, and the culture that emerged around the production of texts and their use.

A weakness lies in its own binary thinking. In seeking to correct the excesses of performance criticism’s great divides, Nässelqvist too sharply distinguishes various aspects of what can fairly be called performance, minimizing evidence of variations in ancient practice. Although asserting that lectors sat for most public readings, he acknowledges some evidence of standing lectors (74) but does not mention that Luke portrays Jesus standing to read (4:16). In an iconic scene, Ezra stood while reading the Torah (Neh 8:4). Josephus describes the high priest also standing to read (Ant. 4.8.12; see also m. Yoma 7.1). To assert sitting or standing as a default is to obscure evidence of varying cultural situations. While the evidence suggests that most public readers did not memorize their texts to perform without manuscripts, memory played a crucial role for both public readers and audiences (e.g., Dio Chrystostom, Or. 42.4–5, expects some members of his audience to run home and write out his speech and sell it for other orators to use). Plutarch’s Dialogue on Love suggests that his son heard it so many times he wrote it out or committed it to memory (Amat. 1). Studying a text to the extent Nässelqvist describes will inevitably lead to internalization (which is the term that most performance critics now use).

Nässelqvist overemphasizes the distinction between public reading, oratory, and drama. He notes that the “many similarities between the delivery of oratory and drama … are noticeable in the way orators anxiously try to delimit themselves from the activities and disreputability of actors at the same time as they draw parallels to acting and actors” (77 n. 59). The same could be said for the attempt to distinguish public reading from oratory and drama. For example, an aspect of oratory and drama is modulating the voice differently for different characters. In oratory, it is called prosopopoeia. The Greek word
for “actor,” hypokrites, captures the idea of interpreting behind a mask (Greek prosopon). Quintilian (among others) discusses the use of prosopopoeia in oratory to excite the emotions of the audience and make events to come alive, as if they are happening in front of the audience (Inst. 9.2.29–37). Nässelqvist suggests that a public reader also may choose to vary the voice of the narrator and different characters in John’s Gospel. “The lector thus witnesses about him in the voice of the narrator, John the Baptist, Nathanael, and the first disciples” (326). Public readers, like orators and actors, change their voices to help an audience discern changes in speakers. (This seems critical to Nässelqvist’s method; it would have been helpful for “consider voices” to be included in the list of steps for sound mapping.)

Emotion is not discussed by Nässelqvist but lurks behind the discussion of voices and interpretive options that he discerns for a lector and audience. In his study of John 1–4, he hints at the powerful role a lector has in enabling and limiting an audience’s interpretation. For example, he argues that the Samaritan woman’s question, “Where do you get the living water?” (4:11d), can be interpreted in several ways and adds that listeners “cannot simply choose freely between them. Rather, the way in which the lector vocally expresses the question—for example, suspiciously, gravely, ironically, or wonderingly—guides and limits any such choice” (319). This is a keen insight worthy of more attention when describing public reading and manuscript cultures. Communication of emotion is often determinative for how an audience will interpret a speaker.

Embodiment is another issue that ties together public readers, orators, and actors. As they express emotion through tone, pitch, and pace, they inevitably express emotion using their bodies. Although different when holding a scroll, it is likely and even inevitable that some public readers will make facial expressions and gestures as well as vocal changes to increase the impact on audiences. Even holding a codex with two hands, the head, shoulders, and body will move with the pace and emotion of the text. The more that a text has been prepared, the more likely it is embodied according to the cultural expectations of the performer and audience. It is difficult to imagine that someone who studied the text as much as Nässelqvist suggests a professional lector did would not move the body and express it bodily in ways congruent with audience expectations. Nässelqvist is right to correct the excesses of BPC practitioners who suggest that early Christian performances always included movement as if on a stage, but he introduces a new binary-thinking error by excluding the small and large ways a public reader embodies the text.

Public Reading in Early Christianity is a strong contribution that helps us more accurately describe early Christian reading cultures. It deserves a wide reading so biblical scholars better understand how the texts we study were and are performed in various ways for different audiences.