

THE “GUTENBERG GALAXY” AND THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Since the consequences of printing have not been thoroughly explored, guidance is hard to come by. (Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 70)

We are confronted with our present-day habits of thought; for we ourselves think of books as “containing” chapters and paragraphs, paragraphs as “containing” sentences, sentences as “containing” words, words as “containing” ideas, and finally ideas as “containing” truth. Here the whole mental world has gone hollow. (Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue*, 121)

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. (Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*. <https://pdf.yt/d/vNiFct6b-L5ucJEa>)

ABSTRACT

The general thesis of this essay states that Gutenberg’s print revolution has been a constitutive factor in the formation of the modern scholarship of the Bible. Specifically, the essay explores the historical-critical study of the New Testament from the angle of the typographic medium. Gutenberg’s print Bible is explained as setting the standards for the technologically-organised *typographic space*. The bulk of the essay describes both the constructive and the deconstructive impact that the fully rationalised format of the Bible has had on theological, exegetical, and hermeneutical sensibilities. Among the issues illuminated by the typographic examination are: entirely identical biblical texts; a text-centred concept of Christian origins; the spread of a post-Gutenberg intellectualism; the rise of the critical, textual edition; the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*; the diminution of oral, memorial sensibilities; the premise of originality versus derivativeness, and many others. In all, it is argued that the print medium deeply affected the modern academic scholarship of the New Testament, for better and for worse.

Keywords: Gutenberg Galaxy; printing press; New Testament; Elizabeth Eisenstein; Walter J. Ong; Marshall McLuhan; typographic space; media myopia; *Mnemosyne*; typographic captivity



INTRODUCTION

I dedicate this essay to the memory of the late Elizabeth Eisenstein, who served for many years as professor of history at the University of Michigan. She is best known for her two-volume set, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*,¹ in which she explored the implications and consequences of the shift from pen to print more than five centuries ago. Her *magnum opus* achieved worldwide recognition, was translated into many languages, and is still vital to the discourse in numerous disciplines. Among the cultural developments that have been profoundly affected by the typographic technology she identified Renaissance Humanism, the Reformation, and the rise of the modern sciences. But, she claimed, there has been a general failure to acknowledge print technology as a catalyst of change with far-reaching ramifications in Western history. All too often, importance has been assigned to other factors at the price of subordinating or suppressing print. "The Renaissance probably did less to spread printing than printing did to spread the Renaissance."² And in the case of the Reformation, Eisenstein expressed herself similarly: "It is not easy to explain why Reformation studies place first things last, given the interval between Gutenberg and Luther."³ Since, in her judgment, Renaissance Humanism, the Reformation, and the rise of modern sciences precipitated the transition from medieval intellectualism to modernity, the Gutenberg technology, deeply implicated in all three of them, can justly be viewed as one of the principal forces that ushered in and helped shape the modern mind. In different words, pre-modernism and the modern world are, or ought to be, truly inconceivable without the typographic invention. Eisenstein's study, overflowing with information about material and cognitive aspects that were intricately linked with the print medium, spans a wide spectrum of social, political, and economic processes, and extensively covers artistic, educational and religious theories and practices. What plainly emerges from the two volumes is a sense of the global influence that the printing press exerted on all walks of life.

EISENSTEIN ON PRINTED BIBLE TEXTS, FAITH AND LITURGY

Not the least of Eisenstein's contributions was the vast amount of information she has gathered concerning the capacity of printed texts (as over against hand-written manuscripts) to reshape the theological and scholarly approaches to the Bible. Specifically, her study presents the kind of data one rarely finds in *Introductions* to the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, and provides valuable insights into the key role played by the print Bible in the typographic revolution. By way of example, she

1 Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change. Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*. 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

2 Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*, 180.

3 Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*, 368.

explained how the new medium enhanced the authority of the Bible, discussed relations between typographic fixity and the rise of historical scholarship, and she described the growing ability to experience a sense of the past by looking backward from a fixed distance. Moreover, she has much to say about the displacement of the pulpit by the press, changes in hearing/reading practices, and the emergence of the solitary reader at the expense of communal hearing. In addition, she explored print's effects on faith and liturgy, the steady growth of elaborately constructed print versions, soon to be called critical editions, the proliferation of vernacular versions of the Bible, and rapidly mounting challenges to the Vulgate.

The printing press, she argued, laid the material foundation for the spread of reading and learning, facilitated the dissemination of book learning with far-reaching cognitive implications, and ushered in an ever more fully rationalised, quantitative management of knowledge—all factors that fostered efforts at advancing ecumenical concord and a spirit of toleration, while simultaneously generating intellectual disputes and fanning the flames of religious zeal and bigotry. Especially pertinent are her observations concerning deep connections between print and Protestantism, the latter's leanings toward literalism, and the Protestant fusion of biblical fundamentalism with insular patriotism. In the early post-Gutenberg era, Eisenstein wrote, “Protestants and printers had more in common than Catholics and printers did.”⁴ Catholicism, she argued, was seeking to hold in check the consequences of the new medium by controlling the growing flow of information through *Index* and *Imprimatur*. But in the end, Gutenberg's invention was helping both Luther by disseminating his translation of the Bible and the growth of vernaculars, and Loyola by propelling a Catholic revival.

Following Eisenstein's lead, this essay aims to examine the historical, biblical scholarship as a medium product of Gutenberg's print revolution. With roots extending deeply into patristic and medieval theology, the modern scholarship of the Bible received its foundational impetus in the Reformation, the principal religious movement that was itself initiated and mediated via the Gutenberg invention. From its very inception, therefore, biblical scholarship was intricately associated with the typographic invention of the fifteenth century, and in conjunction with the rise of print technology destined to become mainstream criticism in the post-Gutenberg era. Based on these considerations, the principal thesis that this essay seeks to demonstrate can be stated as follows: *Print was the medium in which modern biblical scholarship was born and from which it has acquired its formative methodological tools, exegetical conventions, and intellectual posture.*

Print technology's deep engagement in biblical scholarship does not leap to the eye. Eisenstein, however, by entitling the first chapter of her *magnum opus*: *The Unacknowledged Revolution*,⁵ has directly drawn readers' attention to “the current

4 Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*, 406.

5 Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*, 3-42.

myopia about the impact of print."⁶ No doubt, since the publication of her two volumes in 1979, numerous studies on the print medium and its revolutionary impact have appeared. Among them, by far the most important treatment of the print revolution has been Michael Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit*,⁷ an analysis of massive proportions that treated the subject from the angle of the modern media and communications theory. It now seems obvious that with the advent of the digital revolution, a retrospective view of the prior media history of orality, chirography, and typography is potentially feasible and in some measure underway. Still, Eisenstein's observations about a media myopia remain relevant even today. Along with classical philology and philosophy, the modern scholarship of the Bible has strikingly failed to acknowledge and scrutinise the typographic technology that has mediated virtually all of its professional publications. It seems odd that while some quarters in biblical scholarship are slowly absorbing the results of oral-scribal media studies, next to nobody has shown any deeper interest in or critical awareness of the very medium in which we have been transacting our work well over five centuries. Eisenstein's epigraph to this piece that laments the failure to explore print's consequences is particularly relevant to New Testament (and biblical) studies. To biblical scholars, the typographic medium rarely, if ever, appears to have been of investigative interest. Why would that be the case?

Again, Eisenstein comes to our assistance in clarifying this issue. Notwithstanding the explosive spread of the digital revolution, many of us are still children of the print technology that has been in place for a remarkably long time-span. No matter how deeply we have been wading into cyberspace, none of us can entirely escape "the quasi-hypnotic power of print."⁸ Irrespective of one's personal age, print has left deep marks on all of us, and to this day printed materials have remained our daily consumption. It is a key attribute of print that it produces something in the sensible world outside us, and simultaneously acts inside us, affecting the way our mind works. Such are the transformative powers of print that they manifest themselves both materially and cognitively. This now takes us back to the question concerning media myopia. The irony of print's system of operations, and indeed of all technologies, is that the more deeply they penetrate our inner self, the less we are able to recognise its presence. Eisenstein saw this clearly: "It is difficult to observe processes that enter so intimately into our own observations."⁹ This raises a further question. Is it possible that the print revolution has remained largely unacknowledged in biblical scholarship precisely because it is, along with classical philology, the most textual and bookish of academic disciplines? So deeply have our daily interactions with books and manuscripts, our reading and writing

6 Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*, 17.

7 Michael Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit. Eine historische Fallstudie über die Durchsetzung neuer Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien* (Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, 1991).

8 Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*, 16.

9 Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*, 8.

habits, and our scholarly thinking and reasoning, become part of ourselves that we lack the cognitive and psychological distance necessary to acknowledge print’s impact on ourselves. *We tend to be least conscious of that which affects us most deeply.*

There was a time when it was assumed that modernity’s critical scholarship had within its powers to take us straight back to a text’s subject matter or to the latter’s meaning in its historical context. Hermeneutics, literary criticism, and reader-response criticism have long since disposed of this assumption. However, despite profound insights into the intricacies of understanding, and into the complexity of interrelations between interpreter and text, biblical hermeneutics has, to my knowledge, rarely ever come to terms with the impact of technology on epistemology. Again, irony has played its intriguing game with us: *what is right before our eyes has remained hidden from our view.* Content-driven as we are, we came to think of typography—if we thought of it at all—as a neutral carrier of content, and it did not occur to us to appreciate the medium itself as a vehicle of intelligibility. It is now more than 50 years ago since Marshall McLuhan, in his breathtakingly original book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*,¹⁰ sought to enlighten his readers about the power of the media, the interiorisation of media technologies, and the media’s effect on our senses and sense perception. In his epigraphs to this piece, he forcefully articulates the all-pervasive impact of media. In this essay I have taken McLuhan’s insights, along with Eisenstein’s study, itself inspired by McLuhan, as my guide in viewing the discipline of historical, biblical scholarship from a new angle.

THE GUTENBERG EFFECT

New media do not spring into existence like Athena from the head of Zeus. Nothing could be further from the truth. New media feed on the conventions and technologies of prior media, relying on them as they absorb and transform them. It would seem easy to challenge the notion of media transits by arguing that all, or most, of the alleged new features had been in place for some time. Gutenberg’s construction of the movable letter types is a case in point. Printers worked with a large repertoire of symbols that far exceeded the number of alphabetic letters. It was comprised of lower and upper case letters, ligatures (the fusion of two letters into a single character), spaces (blank types), punctuation marks, and a series of additional notations. As far as size was concerned, a single letter type had to be cast to a thousandth of an inch, lest the lines were turning out uneven. Sameness of types was an ideal uppermost on the mind of the printers. This manufacture of characters required work of extraordinary technical skills and exactitude. The point is worth stressing that, in the words of Giesecke, one is dealing with “a through and through artificial language that had to be planned and metallicly

10 *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 48-50.

constructed beforehand."¹¹ In short, one is witnessing the construction of a new medium. And yet, in spite of the thoroughly technological nature of the new invention, Gutenberg, along with other printers, took the trouble of closely examining the script of manuscripts in order to accomplish the desired maximum perfection. Their preoccupation with the new technology notwithstanding, the chirographic medium still served them as a model for their own work. This is not to say that the media transit is to be understood as simply a process of borrowing. Even though parts of the chirographic medium came to serve as a template for the construction of the new medium, the transformation of the characters into thoroughly technologised letter types resulted in an entirely new medium that had the potential for social, technological, and cognitive changes of unprecedented scope. In the end, the "High-Tech of the fifteenth century,"¹² this new, thoroughly technologised language restructured many aspects of history as it had been known in and through previous media.

It is not the intention of this essay to advocate for a single rationale for the genesis of historical, biblical scholarship. The discipline is intricately enmeshed in the matrix of Western intellectual, social, and cultural history. Numerous historical tributaries have been flowing into the body of the modern study of the Bible, rendering it a complex mix of diverse sub-disciplines, plural approaches, and numerous cultural traditions. Notably, the title of Eisenstein's book refers to the printing press as *an* agent of change, and hence *not the sole cause* of cultural transformations. Along with Eisenstein, I am resistant to monocausal explanations. My intention is to draw attention to the typographic medium that has been a constitutive factor in the formation of modern biblical scholarship, but has remained largely unacknowledged. I seek to complicate and enrich our understanding of the history of the discipline, and not to reduce it to single causality.

Media and media transits consistently operate *ad bonam et ad malam partem* (for better and for worse). Gain and loss are simultaneously involved in every technological advance. That media work for better and for worse is, or ought to be, one of the ground rules of any serious consideration of the role of media in history. Periods of media transitions—whether from discourse and dialogue to script, from manuscripts to print, from print to what McLuhan has called the "electric or post-literate time," or from there to the present digital age— have never amounted to an unbroken ascent toward the promised land any more than they have led to irreversible decline. Routinely, the new medium, while facilitating expanded storage and communication practices, coupled with a complexification in consciousness, also generates disruption and deconstruction of values and authorities that had been in favour by the previous medium. McLuhan has already described the alphabet as "an aggressive and militant absorber and transformer

11 Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit*, 98: "eine durch und durch künstliche, im vorhinein zu planende und metallisch zu konstruierende Sprache."

12 To the best of my knowledge, "High-Tech des 15. Jahrhunderts" is a designation invented by Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit*, 67-68.

of cultures,”¹³ and he refers to the introduction of literacy and of print as cultural “disturbances.”¹⁴ The print Bible, for example, was by no means the unmixed blessing that its promoters had envisioned. On the one hand, it substantially raised the level of literacy and encouraged a steadily growing number of vernacular translations. On the other hand, early print versions were often hastily composed and of poor quality. With the rise of “print capitalism”¹⁵ the profit motive increasingly was a significant stimulant for the new entrepreneurial class of printers. What was duplicated a hundred fold and a thousand fold, were both impeccably typeset texts as well as textual flaws and errors. Just as we are experiencing the digital medium rapidly replacing print and relativising more than 500 years of communications culture, so did the print medium, I argue, eclipse and undermine a whole set of oral-scribal-memorial values and faculties that were intrinsic features of the chirographic culture.

With printing, technical control over language reached a state of perfection never achieved before in history. The production and the setting of types and symbols allowed Gutenberg to come up with printed products that were far superior to the precision and beauty already achieved in *scribal space*. Gutenberg’s work resulted in the construction of *typographic space* in the sense that technology had taken full control over the page. In the case of the print Bible, each page was systematically formatted, meticulously linearised, with equidistant lines perfectly aligned along fully justified margins—left and right, top and bottom. It is worth noting that whereas the development of the design and construction of the modern computer evolved over a period of roughly one hundred years, the typographic revolution made its public appearance with a single, stunning masterpiece of technological perfection. Granted centuries of alphabetised technology, the new typographic medium announced itself with explosive suddenness. Gutenberg’s print Bible, the first major machine-made book in Western civilisation, was the technological, cultural, and religious showpiece of the high tech of the fifteenth century. It set the highest standards of technological virtuosity, projecting an image of flawless proportionality, of textual fixity and stability, of finality even. As print products multiplied in ever growing numbers, their tightly systematic organisation began to invade human sensibilities ever more deeply. Slowly but surely, biblical interpreters and some of the Bible-reading public began to forget that “the scriptures had none of the uniform and homogeneous character during the centuries before Gutenberg.”¹⁶ For whereas in oral communication words were without borders, and in the ancient, scribal-oral-memorial culture boundaries were only beginning to be drawn, it was the printed page that laid the groundwork for the notion that knowledge—spatialised, linearised,

13 McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 48-50.

14 McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 4.

15 The concept of “print capitalism” was introduced by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York: Verso Books, 1983), 18, passim.

16 McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 135.

and thoroughly systematised—was fully captured and comprehensible on meticulously organised, visual surfaces. As memories of a different media past began to fade, interpreters became accustomed to thinking of the message of the Bible as a perfectly designed *typographic space*. Moreover, in its homogeneity and fixity the print Bible conveyed the impression of durability and permanence. It was as if print was managing to escape the ravages of time, approaching the status of perfection, promoting illusions of objectivity, even conjuring up notions of immortality.¹⁷

From the outset, the Bible was a major, if not the major beneficiary of the new medium. The Scripture in print was the perfect manifestation of the new, mechanical way of writing (*ars artificialiter scribendi*). In the wake of a millennial communications pre-history embodied in a vast array of scribal forms consigned to different material surfaces, the typographically transformed Bible stood out in plain view. Its exceptional linguistic systematisation, coupled with an unearthly beauty, projected a never-before-visualised model of authority. This empowerment of Sacred Scripture found theological expression in the Protestant *sola scriptura*, a concept that had no rivals in previous Jewish and Christian history, let alone in Greek, Roman or Hellenistic literary culture. What has rarely ever been pointed out is that the articulation and conceptualisation of *sola scriptura* is unthinkable without the stimulus and generative force of print. *From media perspectives, it does seem appropriate to define sola scriptura as the theological manifestation of the typographic apotheosis of the Bible.* It explains why it was the Protestant Reformers who came up with and advanced the unique formula. They had initially embraced the new medium more eagerly than the Catholic Church, and for this reason were more readily disposed to translate their technological experience into theological terms. As pointed out above, however, media advances entail deconstructive consequences or “disturbances,” as McLuhan would have it. One of the consequences of *sola scriptura* was the Protestant rejection or relativisation of tradition. Notwithstanding the masterfully implemented empowerment of the print Bible, the intricately related downgrading of tradition to inferior rank generated an impoverishment of Protestant theology and further inflamed the Protestant-Catholic divide.

Apart from the aesthetic homogeneity and a fully rationalised format, the most striking feature of the production of the print Bible was a never-before experienced sameness. Two technological devices helped to accomplish full textual identity. One, the typesetting of standardised characters resulted in total linguistic identity of each single page. Sameness of characters, I pointed out above, was an ideal pursued by the printers who cast a vast number of identical types. The second reason was the duplicating mechanism peculiar to print, that is the technological facility to reproduce a potentially infinite number of uniform copies. Prior to the invention of printing, complete sameness had never been experienced. Full identity is not known to nature, nor is it an attribute of the human species. No one plant, or animal, or human being is totally like any other.

17 On the early understanding of the printing press as “an engine of immortality,” see McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 202-206.

Rather, the same living species are both similar and dissimilar. Typically, philosophy has been struggling with the phenomenon of *identity and difference*, and rarely with complete sameness. As far as communications history is concerned, oral tradition speaks with a plurality of voices, and the chirographic medium never accomplished the complete identity of manuscripts. The print technology of exact repeatability changed the rules of the game.

As a result of the duplicating techniques of typography, a mass production of totally identical copies was set into motion. McLuhan, who has made a thorough analysis of these phenomena, stated that "just as print was the first mass-produced thing, so it was the first uniform and repeatable 'commodity.'"¹⁸ Every single manuscript that was typeset with identical characters and processed through the same copying mechanisms of the printing press was now totally alike. Identical textual copies were beginning to flood the market. To an unprecedented extent, scholars and theologians in different parts of Europe were able to read the same texts, and increasingly identical biblical texts. This ever-growing sameness of texts became the new reality, indeed the *new textual ideal*. As more and more texts were standardised, something suggested itself, which in that form had never existed before: *the standard text*. Experience taught that the plurality of copied texts was really one and the same text. As the print edition of the Greek New Testament, mechanically constructed and copied in steadily growing numbers, flourished in terms of prestige and influence, it came to convey the impression that it was the one and only text. Scholars seized upon the print edition and came to appreciate it as the standard for their intellectual pursuits, and theologians were inclined to view it as the uniquely reliable basis of faith. Eisenstein was well aware of the epistemological ramifications of the new technology: "standardisation," she observed, "was a consequence of printing,"¹⁹ and furthermore that "the implications of standardisation may be underestimated."²⁰

THE NEW TEXTUAL NORM

The new experience of the standard text was bound to impact interpreters' imagination and scholarly practices. Hermeneutically, the standardised text, ceaselessly copied and ever more frequently interpreted, cited, and read, gave rise to the impression of being *the normative text*. Again, one observes a small, but consequential advance in dealing with the typographic text. It implied that the print version was not only technically feasible and suitable for mass production, but theologically normative. It is one thing to recognise standardisation in the sameness of a plurality of copies, yet a somewhat different matter to argue that the technologically standardised products also represented a theologically normative text.

18 McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 125.

19 Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*, 8.

20 Eisenstein, *The Printing Press*, 81.

There was one more step the standardised, normative text had to take to achieve supremacy in communications history. As is well known, the so-called Nestle-Aland text of the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, reproduced in countless numbers of identical texts, was until recently sold and promoted as *the original text*, the *Urtext*. With this claim to originality, another seemingly innocuous, but highly significant step was taken. Now the text presented itself under the pretext of having been there first in securing the basis of the New Testament. Moreover, the premise of originality was understood in the sense that all other texts were derivative, hence of secondary significance. Typographic fixity, standardisation and normativity, and last but not least the notion of originality, are all features that assisted in conceiving what eventually was the new ideal of the *textual archetype*. But more than anything it was typography's duplicating mechanism and thriving textual sameness that supported the experience of a master text or template. Based on the concept of the *textual archetype*, a categorical thinking in terms of originality versus derivativeness, and primary versus secondary textual status penetrated the scholarly thinking of New Testament studies. To this day it provides the rationale for the construction of the critical edition, the stemmatological model of text criticism, the concept of the early Jesus tradition, and the Quest of the historical Jesus sayings. To such an extent has the textual archetype become a foundational concept that without it the discipline in its current form remains poorly understood.²¹

Owing to the duplicating powers of print technology, the communications environment underwent rapid changes. In a relatively short period of time, scholars, scientists, and administrators found themselves in a world that was awash in print texts. From the fifteenth century onwards and far into the twentieth century a growing "documentary frenzy took hold once and for all,"²² initially in Europe, but soon in other parts of the world. The expanding quantity and seeming omnipresence of print materials began to have an impact on how one retrospectively imagined the pre-Gutenberg era. In Walter Ong's words, we, the children of the typographic era, allowed "the communications media of our own culture [to] impose themselves on us surreptitiously as absolutes, with crippling effects."²³ As New Testament studies is still fundamentally a culture of the book, so is their model of Christian origins likely to be imagined as a galaxy of proliferating texts, with texts growing out of prior texts and breeding still more texts. But what we have been slow to note is that the prevailing concept of Christian origins is not only dominantly text-based, but specifically print-based. Walter Ong, in his epigraph to this piece, has raised consciousness about ways in which the typographically formatted book has penetrated our thinking. The ascendancy of print and a continual

21 The delineation of textual sameness, standard text, normative text, and textual archetype is not meant to represent a historically accurate sequence. Its purpose is to illuminate a full range of premises entailed in the archetypal concept.

22 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 169.

23 Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word. Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), 20-21.

convention of working with the ancient sources in print format were experiences that contributed to imagining Christian origins via categories and sensibilities that were, habitually more than purposefully, representative of a post-Gutenberg intellectualism. Enmeshed in print materials, scholars were inclined to think typographically, that is to view the ancient communications culture as if through a veil of print.

By way of example, the epistemological model of New Testament *text criticism* operates on a rationale that appears to have been nourished in a typographic media environment. Fundamentally, the discipline has to deal with what by ancient standards is an inordinately large amount of materials: some 5 500 Greek manuscripts, about 10 000 versional manuscripts, and countless patristic citations. In order to come to terms with the vast textual repertoire, text criticism postulated a superior textual authority, an originating point and final reference, in other words an archetypal text. It seems fair to suggest that the desire for a singular textual authority arose from a deep anxiety about the overwhelming pluralism in the tradition.

As is well known, New Testament text criticism realised its objective with the construction of the so-called critical edition. The latter established its authority by arrogating to itself the power to serve as arbiter in judging related texts either by using them selectively to solidify its own authority, or by banishing those that failed the test of textual purity to the netherworld of the critical apparatus. This notion that there exists a single standard text that has overriding powers with respect to all other texts runs counter to oral terms and sensibilities, and the manner in which the standard is systematically composed is unknown in pre-Gutenberg history. Oral culture knows a plurality of speech acts, each of which may be regarded as the original, but not the one speech that asserts itself to the exclusion of all other spoken words. Performative variability is a truism in oral hermeneutics, just as textual pluriformity is a chirographic fact of life in ancient scribal life.²⁴ It may thus not be amiss to suggest that the marginalisation and suppression of the plurality of texts in the interest of the supreme authority of the archetypal text is a manifestation of typographic rationality. By employing the term "the original text," the discipline of text criticism has created the illusion that the tradition commenced with the *Urtext*, thereby obscuring knowledge of the fact that in the beginning was the plurality of many words and not the composite text constructed by intensive scholarly intervention.

24 In a deeply insightful piece of media criticism, Eva Mroczek has argued for great textual fluidity in the scrolls of Qumran: see "Thinking Digitally about the Dead Sea Scrolls: Book History before and after the Book," *Book History* 14 (2011): 241-69. I have tried to make the case for textual fluidity in the Synoptic tradition, in the Jesus traditions in Paul, in the rabbinic tradition, and in the Hellenistic School tradition: see Werner H. Kelber, "The Work of Birger Gerhardsson in Perspective," in *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives*, Werner H. Kelber and Samuel Byrskog, eds. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 173-206. Whereas Mroczek proceeds from the vantage of the digital technology, I operate with the model of scribality, re-oralisation and memory. But the two approaches are, in my view, by no means incompatible.

THE DECLINE OF ORAL, MEMORIAL SENSIBILITIES

The apotheosis of the critical edition of the New Testament marks a supreme victory for the typographic medium, accelerating a development that resulted in the typographically textualised, voiceless discipline.²⁵ For in biblical scholarship as elsewhere, the ascendancy of the print medium, powerfully represented by the new class of printers-entrepreneurs and by the modern publishing business, coexisted with a decline of oral, memorial sensibilities. This diminution of the sensorium is a process that extended over centuries. Earlier I observed that McLuhan had pointed already to the alphabet as a disturbing influence that "can translate any adjacent cultures into its alphabetic mode."²⁶ As far as the chirographic culture is concerned, Joanna Dewey made what undoubtedly is a correct assessment: "written texts have in due course triumphed over the living tradition."²⁷ With respect to the typographic medium, Stephen Moore rightly affirmed that "since Gutenberg we have exchanged a primal sea for dry land,"²⁸ with "primal sea" representing the vast waters of oral tradition and "dry land" the hard rock of textuality. Judging from the vantage of the print medium, oral tradition now came to be stained with the crude label of illiteracy. Forgetfulness has once again obscured our understanding for it is we, the children of print culture, who need to be retrained in order to acquire oral, rhetorical understanding, not to say competence.

Along with the decline of oral sensibilities, memory has until very recently been virtually absent from New Testament (and biblical) studies. This is a phenomenon perhaps even more startling than the demise of oral tradition. Throughout ancient history and the Middle Ages memory has enjoyed a deep and productive history. Although memory is in the process of gaining recognition in biblical scholarship,²⁹ there is no denying that, with rare exceptions,³⁰ it has in the past found no place in historical criticism, in form and redaction criticism, and little appreciation in hermeneutics generally. *Mnemosyne*—

25 In *The Erotic Life of Manuscripts: New Testament Textual Criticism and the Biological Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Yii-Jan Lin brilliantly illuminates the discipline's employment of the biological discourse and categorisation. I seek to demonstrate the discipline's employment of the typographic discourse and categories. In my view, the two theories are by no means incompatible.

26 McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 50.

27 Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church. Speaking, Writing, and the Gospel of Mark*, Cascade Books, BPC 8 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 127.

28 Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels. The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 95.

29 Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, eds., *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity, Semeia St 52* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); Rafael Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance, and Text, Library of New Testament Studies 407* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010); Alan Kirk, *Q in Matthew: Ancient Media, Memory, and Early Scribal Transmission of the Jesus Tradition* (London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

30 Above all, see Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, ASNU 22 (Lund: Gleerup; Copenhagen:Ejnar Munksgaard, 1961); repr, foreword by Jacob Neusner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

mother of the nine Muses, goddess of memory and imagination, one of the five canons of rhetoric, whom Augustine counted, along with will and understanding, as one of the three powers of the soul, treasure-house of eloquence, esteemed custodian of rhetoric, and deep space of the human mind—has played next to no role in the modern study and interpretation of the New Testament. This is an astonishing fact that should prompt deep reflection among all of us committed to the modern study of the New Testament. No doubt, print will have had a heavy hand in the demise of memory.

PRINT’S IMPACT ON THE BIBLE AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

A last example of the impact of typographic thinking on New Testament studies pertains to the so-called *Synoptic Problem*. As is well known, in *Introductions* to the New Testament as well as in Wikipedia, the problem is classically defined as that of *the literary relationship of the three Synoptic gospels*. In our teaching, many of us, I am sure, have used the visually intelligible, spatially controlled model of impressive geometric symmetry and balance. The two features that distinguish the model are the gospels’ arrangement in parallel columns and straight-line connections between the three gospels and Q. So visually persuasive is the model that it takes significant mental efforts to recognise that it works so well because it has tightly controlled a typographic space that leaves no room for oral and memorial dynamics; those very dimensions that played a foundational role in the ancient communications history. “Considered within the context of ancient reading practices,” Pieter Botha writes, “the linear, literary connections seen as a solution to the so-called synoptic problem become highly problematic.”³¹ Likewise, it requires psychological distance from the deeply interiorised model to acknowledge that the alignment in parallel columns is an extreme abstraction that works well on paper and is designed to accommodate our comparative curiosity, but may little, if anything, contribute to the gospels’ real life in historical context. Defined until recently as a literary problem, and diagrammatically presented in linear, textual terms, the solution is bound to be a literary one. In its fully spatialised, linearised, and systematised form, the model stands as an impressive example of print’s organising and systematising powers.

Precisely what was it that caused the virtual disappearance of oral and memorial sensibilities from the discipline? I have pointed to the overriding powers of the typographic medium, the growth in print materials that favoured the logic of intertextuality, a spreading documentary intellectualism, and the supreme authority of the print Bible. But there is another issue, perhaps the key factor, largely unacknowledged, that accounts for the diminution of the human sensorium. The issue is technology. It was the professional experience of the new class of typesetters and printers, plus an ever-growing number of affiliates and beneficiaries, that *the typographical book was solely*

31 Pieter Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity*, Cascade Books, BPC 5 (Eugene, OR: Wipf&Stock, 2012), 110.

the product of mechanical processes. The very senses that had played a constructive role in ancient and medieval communication processes— oral and memorial— turned out to be pointless and unnecessary. Hence in the age of the typographic *high tech*, method and technological construction take precedence over speaking, hearing and remembering. In short, oral tradition and memory are marginalised and suppressed because they have lost their *raison d'être* in the production process of books.

Reformation historians, along with media experts, are united in pointing out that the typographic revolution, epitomised by the Gutenberg Bible, introduced a profoundly democratising element into Western history. This is surely indisputable when strictly viewed from the perspective of book culture. Few things express the communications revolution of the fifteenth century more powerfully than the fact that the Bible was becoming the book of the people. But in the broader context of media history, a more nuanced picture emerges. Heavily oral cultures, for example, practise a radical democracy in terms of the production, consumption and accessibility of spoken words: almost everybody can speak and almost everybody can hear. Moreover, words in oral discourse are without borders, and forever in the making. As John Miles Foley has beautifully argued, the electronically empowered *Internet* exhibits many similarities and correspondences with oral tradition. A vast and steadily changing body of knowledge is floating in borderless virtuality and accessible through freely chosen links and pathways. As Foley would have it, there is such a phenomenon as cyberdemocracy.³² It is against this backdrop that the status of manuscripts appears in a new light. Already handwritten texts are subject to severe spatial constraints that force knowledge into a linearised, sequenced format. There is, moreover, limited literacy in the pre-Gutenberg era because the chirographic page is the domain of those very few who have mastered the chirographic channels of communication. So the printing press did democratise communication but not as much as oral tradition and the *Internet*. As Eisenstein had argued, the printing press was an agent of change and crucially responsible for the shaping of the modern mind. But the changes wrought by print, she demonstrated, operated *ad bonam et ad malam partem*. On the one hand, the achievements of the historical scholarship of the New Testament (and of the Bible) are a splendid manifestation of the spirit of modernity. As a matter of fact, modernity is unthinkable without the historical-critical ethos of modern biblical scholarship. But this other side is often forgotten: the modern, text-centred, print-oriented discipline, this medium product of the Gutenberg print revolution, has exacted a steep price for its intellectual accomplishments. I have drawn attention to the textualisation of tradition, the gradual elimination of the role of memory, a censoring of the majority of textual variants, and a silencing of the voices of the speaking majority. There are selectivity, censorship and serious marginalisation involved in the processes of the historical study of the New Testament.

32 John Miles Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet. Pathways of the Mind* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 131.

CONCLUSION

One important lesson media studies can teach us is that the historical-critical scholarship of the Bible, long imagined to be a beacon of unshakable objectivity, is deeply entrenched in a media history that in the case of the New Testament texts, is more than 20 centuries removed from the history they are narrating. Despite its typographically rooted scientific pretensions, the discipline does not constitute a timeless set of universally -valid principles that had long been waiting to be discovered, and once brought to the light of print, have now been formalised for use in perpetuity. To the contrary, many of our methodological tools, text-critical and editorial practices and assumptions about ancient word processing and the nature of tradition need to be released from what I have called an entrenched typographic captivity.³³

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33 Werner H. Kelber, *Imprints, Voiceprints, and Footprints of Memory* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 4, 413, passim.

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