

ANCIENT CURSES IN BATH: ORAL OATHS, LEAD ETCHINGS, AND THE IMPACT ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Lee A. Johnson

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0646-5795>

East Carolina University

johnsonle@ecu.edu

ABSTRACT

In 1979 the discovery of a cache of curse tablets from the sacred springs of the temple of Sulis Minerva in Bath brought to light some processes by which inscriptions were produced and employed by people outside of the upper class of Greco-Roman society. The tablets reveal that professional scribes were hired by supplicants to assist with the composition of their requests and the inscription onto lead tablets before being cast into the sacred spring. Such attention to the written form of the curses is intriguing in light of the fact that the majority of the supplicants could not read these inscriptions. In addition to the tablets that appear to be etched by professional scribes at Bath, there are also tablets that contain pseudo-inscriptions, mere markings that appear to be an attempt at replicating letters. These pseudo-inscriptions, while they did not contain the official lettering of a spoken curse, conveyed the added import that an etched tablet made to the supplication. The Bath tablets present a new view of the function of writing in a non-literate society, which has implications for the way that Biblical texts were viewed in their ancient contexts, vis-à-vis the oral transmission of the sacred message.

Keywords: ancient literacy; Biblical authority; inscriptions; orality

INTRODUCTION

In 1979 a cache of the so-called “curse tablets” was discovered in the excavation of the sacred spring of the Temple of Sulis Minerva in Bath, England (Cunliffe 1998). The Bath collection of 130 tablets dates back to between the second and fourth centuries C.E. and is among the largest of any such find. At the time the Bath cache was discovered,



Oral History Journal of South Africa
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/OHJSA>
Volume 5 | Number 2 | 2017 | #3562 | 16 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2309-5792/3562>
ISSN 2309-5792 (Print)
© Unisa Press 2017

approximately 1500 curse tablets had been recovered world-wide. This collection of tablets is etched with inscriptions on thin sheets of hammered lead, many of which were folded to enclose the inscriptions on the inside of the tablets. Most of the inscribed tablets contain messages in the form of requests (imperatives) to the goddess to enact retribution on the perpetrator who had wronged the supplicant in some way. Some tablets are written backward (from right to left) in their entirety, or are reversed just within the lists of names of the suspected wrongdoers. A few tablets include artistic renderings to accompany the demands, and others contain markings that appear to replicate writing, with lines and hatch-marks that fill the tablet. Even fewer tablets were uncovered that contain no etchings.

Of interest to me is the interplay of the inscribed tablet, which is the written form of the “curse” as part of the entire ritual of the petition to the goddess to grant the request of the supplicant. The extant tablets reveal a complicated and costly process behind the production of the written curse, and serve as yet another example of the prevalence of written texts within the context of a largely non-literate culture.¹ This article begins with a description of the character and function of the curse tablets from Bath and explores the impact that an etched curse was deemed to have on the efficacy of the supplication to the goddess Sulis Minerva. The article concludes that the discovery of concurrent written and oral curses might bring to bear on our perceptions of the value and primacy of written sacred texts in the early centuries in the church.

LITERACY IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

In order to assess the impact of the etched curse tablet upon the supplication to the goddess Sulis Minerva at Bath, England in the first three centuries C.E., several aspects of ancient Greco-Roman culture need to be explored briefly. First, is the description of the society as “non-literate.” William V. Harris’ work on *Ancient Literacy* long considered the most respected research on this topic, concludes that no more than 10 per cent of the urban population and less than five per cent of the rural population of the entirety of the early Roman Imperial Period was literate (Harris 1989, 175–284). Harris’ conclusions have recently been challenged by researchers such as William Johnson and Holt Parker, whose significant volume on ancient literacy research delineates the problematic details of assigning blanket percentages of literacy rates across the Roman Empire (Johnson and Parker 2009). The very definition of “literate” is elusive. For instance, a person may have the ability to read a simple document, but may not have the ability to print his own letter to send to his relative. Conversely, there appear to be ancient experts in letter-copying who, although adept at the process of letter formation, are not able to decipher what words those individual letters represent. There is a vast difference between a person with rudimentary reading skills and limited sight vocabulary and an individual who can

1 Other examples include amulets and phylacteries, worn to attract another person to the wearer or to ward off demons or disease and civic inscriptions that honour benefactors (Johnson 2016).

read fluently, successfully formulate lettering on papyrus, and compose literary works. This disparity of ability is revealed in the comments of the Roman statesman Cicero, who distinguishes between his favourite scribe Tiro, who could transcribe Cicero's (1965) remarks by "follow[ing] whole sentences", and Spintharo, who was only able to compose what he heard when the message was broken into distinct syllables (*Att.* 13.25). The official documents of Petaus, who held the title and position of "village scribe" of Karanis in northern Egypt from the late second century C.E. underscore the range of expectations for literacy between the ancient Mediterranean world and current Western culture. Among the Petaus artifacts was found a scrap of papyrus upon which he practiced his own signature 12 times, attempting to correct the lettering with each attempt. Other documents he produced are crudely lettered, with numerous omissions and misspellings (Haines-Eitzen 2000, 27–28).

It appears that the well-educated (and senatorial class) Roman citizen did not strive to excel at tasks that current society considers as fundamental to any primary education. For instance, the act of printing letters onto papyrus, lead, and parchment was considered a demeaning task to be avoided by the literate elites in society (Gamble 1995, 90–91). Cicero, whose extant volumes of letters attest to his erudition, claims to leave the work of copying his words to an amanuensis to whom he dictated his remarks (*Att.* 4.16, 8.13). Likewise, Paul's New Testament letters indicate that he did not do the physical transcription of his own correspondence. He includes closing remarks in two letters in which he intervenes in the writing process to provide personally-printed greetings—in 1 Corinthians 16:21—"I, Paul write this greeting with my own hand"—and Galatians 6:11—"See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand." Paul's letter to the Romans closes with greetings from his amanuensis: "I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord" (Romans 16:22)—thereby confirming his role in the production of the document. Employment of an amanuensis, it appears, occurred from both sides of the literacy spectrum in the ancient world. Those who could not read and write required the services of a copyist out of necessity, while those who were well educated hired the copyist in order to avoid the menial labour of producing a printed document.

In addition to the differences between ancient and modern writing instruction and the perception of the value of the skill of handwriting, the essential materials needed to produce something as basic as a letter were cost-prohibitive for most people in the ancient world. Although it is difficult to determine the cost of producing a curse tablet, the price of a sheet of prepared papyrus large enough to contain a letter the length of Paul's letter to the Galatians has been calculated as equivalent in US exchange rates to \$35.00 (White 1986, 3). Neither would most households contain writing implements; letters would require a stylus and prepared charcoal cake, and for inscription on a lead tablet, an instrument for etching.



Figure 1: Inscriptions from the Celsus Library at Ephesus

Photo: Lee A. Johnson

Therefore, based on the limitations of access to education by the majority of the population in the ancient world, the differing attitudes towards the essential aspects of education (in particular, handwriting), and the economic cost of writing implements, handwriting was a luxury that the majority of the population could not afford. It is therefore, safe to assume that access to and use of printed materials for personal life existence was not typical for most people in the Roman Empire. Yet, despite the obstacles of printing production in the ancient world, a remarkable amount of inscription, etching, and printed examples survive from the Roman Imperial Period, particularly from urban areas. Famous classicist Ramsay MacMullen describes the phenomenon as “the epigraphic habit” of the Romans, as any visit to an excavation of a Roman ruin will attest (MacMullen 1982, 233–46).

CURSE TABLETS: CONTENT, PRODUCTION, AND APPLICATION

The cache of curse tablets at Bath is but one such find from the ancient world. Binding spells composed on prepared lead sheets date back from as early as the fifth to fourth centuries B.C.E., and originate in Sicily and southern Greece. Many more have been recovered from the Roman period (between the first and sixth centuries C.E.), totaling around 1500 (Gager 1992, 3–4). There are four primary motives behind curse tablet composition:

to curse calumniators, thieves, embezzlers, and perhaps to recover what has been lost; to hamper or silence the opposition in a lawsuit; to curse rivals in love, or to gain someone’s love; and to curse charioteers and their horses.” (Cunliffe 1998, 60; Gager 1992, 45–46, 78)

Because most of the extant tablets are composed in Latin, the term *defixiones* is ascribed to the artifacts, which is the Latin noun related to the verb “to bind.” Binding is the action most often requested by the supplicants, both for amorous connections and for athletic or oratory competitions. To “bind” another’s affections to the supplicant restricts them from giving their attention to others; to “bind” another’s limbs (or the limbs of their horse) inhibits their athletic abilities in competition; and to “bind” the tongue of one’s oppositional orator/legal representative in court inhibits their ability to express arguments with clarity. If a particular object of intent is targeted, an image of the person or animal might be included with the inscription (Gager 1992, 5). The name of the deity to which the request is made is explicit in most cases (Faraone 1991, 5). The binding spells related to athletic competitions have often been recovered at the arena site, buried in the starting blocks.

There are enough similarities in the language and syntax of the *defixiones* to deduce that supplicants were assisted in the composition of the curses by professional scribes. For instance, most tablets include the name of the perpetrator or target followed by the description of the crime committed. A number of tablets suggest a list of names in the case of a request for a theft to be avenged. In addition to the target of the curse, a personal plea to the god/goddess follows. Finally, specific suggestions for revenge are enumerated—strategic afflictions for specific body parts are most common (Cunliffe 1998, 62). For example, a theft of a pair of gloves owned by Docimedis at Bath demands retribution of the loss of “his minds [sic] and eyes” from the goddess (Cunliffe 1998, 114). The loss of a cloak compels a request for a punishment spanning generations; Docilianus pleads with Sulis to disallow the culprit “sleep or children now and in the future” until the cloak’s return (Cunliffe 1998, 112) – see figure 2.

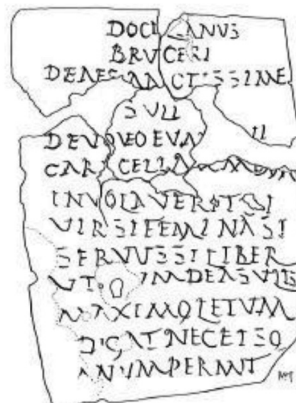
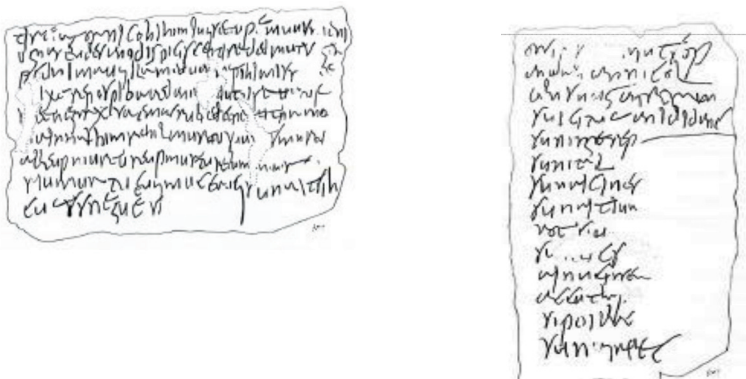


Figure 2: Curse by Docilianus regarding a stolen cloak

Source: Cunliffe 1988, 122

Drawn by R. S. O. Tomlin

Further evidence of the hand of professional scribes in the production of curse tablets is the relative uniformity of the lettering and the use of writing techniques, such as spelling parts of the curse backward or using lettering in unique formations (Gager 1992, 5). One of the Bath tablets that contains the supplication on recto includes a list of 18 possible suspects on verso and each of these is printed in reverse. The use of symbols, scrambled or reversed lettering, and writing in the shape of animals—all deemed to enhance the potency of the curse—support the notion of professional scribes' involvement in the production of the tablets (Johnson 2016, 27–28).



Figures 3 and 4: Recto: Containing the curse concerning the theft of six silver coins, and Verso: List of 18 suspects written from right to left

Source: Cunliffe 1998, 232–33

Drawn by R. S. O. Tomlin

In urban areas that featured shrines and athletic arenas, such as Bath, scholars have suggested that an industry of tablet production existed. Lead was hammered into sheets and cut into small pieces that would be sold to supplicants. Most of them were rectangular in shape, averaging between 50–100 millimeters per side, with most of them etched on one side. The Bath tablets all appear to be composed in Latin, the governmental and legal language of the empire. The tablets also display similarities in compositional elements—an address to the goddess, explicating the offense, naming or suggesting names of the perpetrators, and suggesting penalties for the crimes committed—further supporting the supposition of the role of scribes in the production of the tablets (Cunliffe 1998, 71). It is assumed that supplicants could request special lettering, such as right to left composition of names, for an additional fee. The specific details pertaining to the number of potential perpetrators to be noted and the suggested punishments appear to be left to the accusers.

Once the composition of the tablet was complete, the tablet was often folded to enclose the curse on the inside. A few of the recovered tablets at Bath indicate that a nail

was inserted to firmly seal the folded curse. Although none of such tablets were found in situ, scholars suggest that the tablets with nails would have been affixed to the walls around the shrine at the spring of the goddess. All of the tablets recovered at Bath were found at the base of the shrine when the waters were drained; therefore, it seems logical that most of the tablets were cast into the bubbling waters at the shrine as part of the ritual of the curse.

The Bath cache of tablets reveals an elaborate infrastructure to support the production and imposition of curses in the Roman world. The process involved numerous artisans who assisted the one who petitioned the goddess. They included those who manufactured the lead tablets (including hammering the metal into sheets and cutting and trimming it into appropriate tablet sizes), and those who performed the scribal work of composing and etching the curse according to the specifications of the supplicants as described above, and assisted with the finishing stage of the tablet production (including folding the tablet and, in some cases, inserting the nail through the tablet). There must also have been persons who instructed the supplicants on the ritual of the curse itself (including the language used to address the goddess, phrases the supplicant should speak to facilitate the efficacy of the curse, ritual actions to accompany the speech, and the accepted order for the entire process). Gager notes that oral prayers and invocations are an integral process of instituting a curse, combining the “symbolic medium of written and spoken words” to invoke a power, even for the common person, “that could change the world” (Gager 1992, 118).

The best evidence for the oral aspect of ancient curses survives in the Greek Magical Papyri (*PGM*), dating back from the second century B.C.E. to the fifth century C.E. (Betz 1992). Discovered in Egypt in the 19th century, these papyri display many of the same formulas found on curse tablets, but also contain instructions for preparation of written texts and detailed oral utterances to accompany specific actions, including the deposit of the tablet (Gager 1992, 4–7; Betz 1992, 76). The *PGM* are particularly rich with the use of special letter formations and images intended to enhance the potency of the curse. Two such examples include a pyramid of vowels and a spell written in the shape of a serpent (figures 5 and 6). Ancient curses are assumed to include a verbalised aspect. In their most basic form, curses are supplications spoken to the gods. The surviving inscriptions, tablets, and amulets represent more elaborately designed supplications.

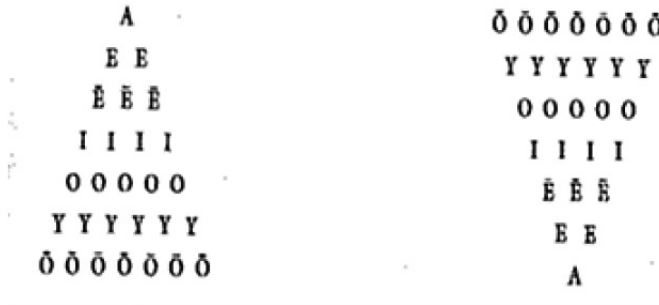


Figure 5: Abecedaria from *PGM*

Source: Betz 1992, 134

© 1986 The University of Chicago.



Figure 6: Phylactery for Bodily Protection from *PGM*

Source: Betz 1992, 3

© 1986 The University of Chicago.

THE BATH TABLETS

Barry Cunliffe, editor of the second volume of *The Finds from the Sacred Spring*, related to the find at the Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath, concurs with Gager's assertion that professional scribes who produced curse tablets in the Roman Empire were also available in Bath (Cunliffe 1988, 85). However, Cunliffe admits that the evidence for professional scribal activity at the Bath site is not universal. Support for scribal composition begins with the basic premise that the mechanical ability to etch letters onto lead tablets was a specialised skill that most supplicants at Bath would not possess. Furthermore, the Bath tablets adhere to the formulaic composition evident in curse tablets throughout the empire. The petitions 1) address the goddess by name, 2) state the offense in question, 3) name or suggest names for the perpetrator(s), and 4) enumerate in detail the punishment to be visited upon the offender. Similarly, the

Bath tablets express the idiomatic language of curses observed throughout the empire. Finally, the orderly composition and sophistication of the lettering of some of the tablets is indicative of the work of trained craftsmen (e.g., figure 7).

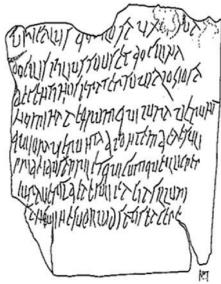


Figure 7: Example of scribal inscription in tablet concerned with perjury

Source: Cunliffe 1998, 226

Drawn by R. S. O. Tomlin

Despite the apparent confirmation of professional scribes at the sacred springs in ancient Bath, there is evidence that can be interpreted as opposing this hypothesis. For example, experts have struggled to match tablets to a common scribal hand. Of the 130 tablets discovered at Bath, there is only one pair of tablets that can assuredly claim the same scribe; no fewer than 90 different script styles have been ascribed within the Bath cache. Further indication against professional scribal inscriptions at Bath lies in the range of competence in the spelling, syntax, and lettering in the tablets. Translators of the tablets uncovered a number of errors in the inscriptions; including misspellings, letter omissions, letter duplications, and failed reversals of names, to name a few. Similarly, the level of virtuosity of the handwriting varies widely from text to text. Some are inscribed with elegant lettering, in formal lines spaced evenly across the tablets—yet others, although legible, display crude lettering, spacing, and distribution. There are a number of tablets that include corrections on the tablets made by overwriting the incorrect text. The errors themselves seem to indicate that a non-professional has performed the etching—however, the swift correction of those errors (occurring prior to the deposition of the tablet) implies expertise at proofreading, if not the painstaking exactitude of a professional.

The evidence at Bath confirms that a number of, if not all inscriptions, were performed by professional scribes in the service of supplicants of Sulis Minerva. Therefore, in the first four centuries C.E., people were paying for inscriptions that they could not etch for themselves, but also that they could not read for themselves. The implication is that supplicants and the industry in Bath believed that printed texts improved curse efficacy, even if the supplicants could not decipher the markings. The added expense of lead tablet and scribal inscription must have been deemed as cost-

effective in order to enhance the prospects of the intervention of the goddess. The tactile action of etching the complaint, folding the lead sheet, and casting it into the sacred pool left tangible evidence of the loss behind after the injured party departed from the waters at Bath. It also stood as an ongoing claim against the thief—his or her name had been inscribed on that tablet that still lay before the goddess, naming the perpetrator for years to come. The printed, lasting legacy of the Bath inscriptions appears to arise from the same motivation that inspired patronage in the Roman Empire. Public benevolence was memorialised by inscriptions, visible to all who passed by, but indecipherable to most. The Bath supplicants sought to give permanence to their pleas to the goddess through inscribing their desires with markings that most of them could not read for themselves.

Perhaps the most provocative finds at Bath are several inscribed curse tablets to which no one has attributed scribal expertise. A number of the Bath tablets contain markings that scribes have classified as “illiterate scribbles”, but Cunliffe prefers the designation “pseudo-inscriptions”—as they have been crafted to resemble writing. These tablets contain markings that appear to imitate letters, but cannot be associated with any known writing (Cunliffe 1988, 247–52). The five tablets vary in their level of sophistication. Figure 8, copied recto and verso, is perhaps the most realistic in its mimicry of the other Latin etchings at Bath. The inscription includes a variety of markings that include curved and straight lines of various sizes and creates forms that appear in fairly regular horizontal lines. Additionally, the etchings occupy most of the total area of the recto side and approximately half of the area on verso. A similar percentage of tablet coverage is visible in figures 3 and 4 above, as well as a number of other finds at Bath.



Figure 8: Mimicry of Latin etchings at Bath

Source: Cunliffe 1998, 248

Drawn by R. S. O. Tomlin

Figure 9 also displays etchings on both sides of the tablet, but with a lower level of verisimilitude than figure 8. Seemingly, there is no attempt to differentiate between recto and verso in this instance, as a similar percentage of area is covered on both sides.

The markings are limited to straight line format only, a less sophisticated motion of the stylus, simpler than the curved or rounded figures that appear in figure 8. However, figure 9 does display double-stroked figures that resemble number sevens or caret markings, which are more complex than the single strokes evident in the three other examples below. Attention has also been paid to the creation of different horizontal lines, with recto displaying four lines and verso displaying five lines.



Figure 9: Etchings on both sides of the tablets

Source: Cunliffe 1998, 249 (Drawn by R.S.O. Tomlison)

Examples of pseudo-inscriptions in figures 10–12 display decreasing attention to the shape of the markings, the percentage of tablet inscription, and the horizontal line arrangement. None of these three remaining examples contains etchings on verso. Figure 10 contains some stylistic sophistication, including numerous double-stroked figures, several curved forms, and some over-writing in the form of horizontal and diagonal lines that appear to be inscribed subsequent to the first layer of etchings. The area of inscription of the tablet is similar to the examples shown above, but it is not clear that the inscriber attempted to compose the markings in horizontal lines. The etchings in figure 11 are primarily restricted to straight, short vertical lines of approximately the same length. This tablet is an extant example of one affixed to the wall of the shrine with a nail (see discussion above), and the nail hole is replicated by the circle in the



Figure 10: (Cunliffe 1998, 250) **Figure 11:** (Cunliffe 1998, 251) **Figure 12:** (Cunliffe 1998, 252)

Drawn by R. S. O. Tomlin.

upper right third of figure 11. The etchings, although less sophisticated in their formation, do appear to be ordered with horizontal intent, and the percentage of coverage of the tablet is comparable to the literate tablets at Bath.

The table in figure 11 displays the least virtuosity of the “pseudo-inscriptions” at Bath. The markings are considerably fewer in number than is consistent in the other tablets in this category. The surviving etchings include four crude sets of crossed lines, with the possible remnants of two others. The markings are similar in size, but a small area of the overall tablet is inscribed. The creator appears to have arranged the meager markings into two horizontal rows, in the style of the literate inscriptions, but with less repetition.

Cunliffe posits two possible motivations for the creation of tablets with simulated writing: 1) that these non-literate tablets may have been produced by those who avoided the scribe’s fee, and either etching their own tablet or enlisting the services of another who attempted to replicate a literate tablet; or 2) that there was social or religious impetus that to inscribe one’s own tablet before presenting it increased its appeal to the goddess (Cunliffe 1998, 100). The inscribers, although clearly neophytes at writing, and by all accounts non-literate, appear to be trying to replicate formulaic curse tablet inscriptions. Whatever the motivation, supplicants must have believed that the efficacy of the plea to the goddess was enhanced by the written text, and that the appearance of writing was more significant than the content, format, or shape of the lettering.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATH TABLETS IN FACILITATING UNDERSTANDING OF THE PLACE OF WRITTEN TEXTS IN AN ORAL CULTURE

Over the last half a century, Biblical scholars have begun to challenge the hegemony of the written text in the practice of Biblical interpretation. Walter Ong was among the first to articulate the problem of oral imagination in current academic endeavors: “Texts have clamored for attention so peremptorily that oral creations have tended to be regarded generally as variants of written productions or, if not this, as beneath serious scholarly attention” (Ong 1982, 8). Moreover, once the problem is acknowledged, it is not clear how the paradigm of thought would be broken, that springs from a culture steeped in printed information: “Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever” (Ong 1982, 12). Joanna Dewey also perceives the problem of textual dominance as ethically complicated. The shift from orality to textuality, both in culture and in scholarly interest undergirds cultural tensions of patriarchy and classism, through the limitations of educational opportunities for women and the poor (Dewey 2013, 26).

It is in the area of Performance Criticism that scholars have made significant progress in calling the field of Biblical scholarship to account for the oral culture within which the Biblical texts developed. Pieter Botha notes that “uncritical and ethnocentric

concepts of the New Testament writings and traditions pervade our studies”—citing the efforts to recover the authentic sayings of Jesus vis-à-vis form, source and redaction criticisms, and the dominance of rhetorical studies for understanding Paul’s letters. These textually-based arenas of Biblical scholarship acknowledge the oral culture from which Jesus’ and Paul’s teachings arose, but their means of interpretation remains shaped by literary critical methodologies (Botha 2012, 16–17). Numerous scholars have exposed the secondary nature of written documents in orally-structured societies. Susan Niditch describes a Hebrew inscription dating from the 18th century B.C.E., located on a wall in a water tunnel. Clearly not meant for passersby, the writing served a sacred function, containing meaning; whether or not others would ever read the words (Niditch 1996, 56–57). Even as the location of the written inscription in the water tunnel reveals that it was not intended to be the primary means of conveying information about the construction, so all sacred written texts should be envisioned as secondary in nature, according to performance scholar David Rhoads. Composition and dissemination of information were accomplished orally; written forms, if completed at all, were inferior in impact to the spoken message. Statues and etchings of ancient orators often are depicted with scrolls, but appear as though they are part of the costume of the speaker; the scrolls are rolled up and enclosed in one hand, rather than unrolled and read publically. Therefore, the presence of the scroll serves to enhance the oral message and authority of the speaker, rather than acting as the primary means of conveying information (Rhoads 2006, 122; Jaffee 2001, 16–17; Johnson 2017, 65). Botha notes that in the process of composition in an oral culture, if writing was employed at all, it only occurred in the last stage of a work (Botha 2005, 632). Botha thus perceives the act of writing as a secondary, if not superfluous part of the process. If completed, a written version of a “text” found its utility in the service of the oral message (Boomershine 1987, 27).

Biblical scholars also note the ancient perception of the mystical potency of the written text within non-literate societies (Loubser 2013, 23). The widespread use of amulets, worn on the body to preserve health and ward off evil spirits, and most often contained writing, is but one example of this perception (Kotansky 1991, 107–37). Similarly, consumption of materials upon which writing was inscribed was used to detect those who spoke untruthfully and to cure illness (Johnson 2017, 28–31).

If written ancient texts were regarded as secondary in authority and as “window dressing” to the primary oral message, then it is incumbent upon modern Biblical interpreters to bring this insight into the methodological arena in which Biblical interpretation is practiced. This process calls into question, among many things, the long-standing authority granted to ancient writings, even those which date back to the inception of the message. Ruth Finnegan is bold to claim that there is no “correct” or “authentic” version in oral literature, and that performed works do not function as “fixed texts” (Finnegan 1988, 89). Therefore, Biblical interpretation that takes the oral culture of the ancient Mediterranean world seriously is forced to seek understanding from written texts that held less authority in the era of their inception than they enjoy in current Western society.

The examination of the use of writing in making supplications to the goddess at Bath can serve as another window into the relationship between the “official” curse and the written accompaniment of that curse. The cache of curse tablets at Bath provides further evidence that the non-literate society in antiquity employed written artifacts into an oral ritual. The ancient practice of cursing someone undoubtedly began as an oral action, including ritual speech, with the inclusion of the written aspect gradually incorporated as a secondary aspect of the ritual (Thomas 1992, 80). Supplicants at Bath paid for a lead sheet as well as the services of scribes who inscribed the offense, the names of the potential culprits, and suggested means of retribution against the offenders. The evidence of the tablets, combined with what is known about literacy in the early centuries C.E. in the ancient Mediterranean world reveals that the petition itself did not depend on the accuracy of the writing on the tablets, nor on the ability of the supplicant to read the inscription. As seen above, mistakes in spelling, omissions, and repetitions were common, even at the hand of a paid scribe. Furthermore, the tablets with “pseudo-inscriptions” underscore that the accuracy of the inscribed tablets was of secondary concern to the supplicants. Indeed, the idea of markings that reasonably mimicked the work of the scribes was deemed to be a worthwhile endeavor in the process of supplication. Inscribed markings that do not conform to actual lettering or the known patterns of inscribed symbols or characters imply that non-literate people viewed even pseudo-inscriptions as potent, and they assumed that a replication of lettering enhanced their supplications.

As Dewey suggests, written accompaniments to oral traditions are perceived, particularly by those who cannot decipher the writing, as adding an element of “prestige and power” to the matter (Dewey 2013, 7). Performance scholar David Rhoads, commenting on the frequent depiction of scrolls in the hands of orators, imagines that the presence of the scroll is secondary, and primarily included to enhance the status of the orator (Rhoads 2006, 122). The Bath tablets further inform these assertions, particularly evidenced in the “pseudo-inscriptions” clearly designed without concern for the accuracy of the content of the inscription. The patrons of the springs of Sulis Minerva embellished their oral pleas to the goddess for vindication of wrongs with etched tablets. The written “curse” was an auxiliary aspect of the supplication. In other words, a curse could be manifest solely through oral utterance without the etched enhancement, but not vice-versa.

CONCLUSION

The Bath tablets represent another voice from antiquity that exposes the secondary status that written texts held to oral utterances, calling into question the “relentless dominance of textuality in the scholarly mind” of modern Biblical interpreters (Ong 1982, 10). The hegemony of critical methodologies for the study of the Bible that focuses solely on the text cannot stand in the face of the mounting evidence to the contrary. The

implications are disquieting for many adherents to Biblical authority, as the assurance of the unchanging truth of the written word has comforted numerous generations of Jews and Christians. However, the archaeological finds at Bath, ironically in their written forms, expose the inferior status of written witnesses in antiquity, and this cultural truth must be applied to the Biblical writings.

REFERENCES

- Betz, H. D (ed). 1992. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, including the Demotic Spells*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University Press.
- Boomershine, Thomas E. 1987. "Biblical Megatrends: Towards a Paradigm for the Interpretation of the Bible in Electronic Media." *SBLSP* 26: 144–57.
- Botha, Pieter J. J. 2005. "New Testament Texts in the Context of Reading Practices of the Roman Period: The Role of Memory and Performance." *Scriptura* 90: 621–40. <https://doi.org/10.7833/90-0-1053>.
- Botha, Pieter J. J. 2012. *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity*. Eugene, OR: Cascade.
- Cicero, M. Tully. 1965. *Epistulae ad Atticum*. Translated by W. S. Watt. Gloucestershire: Clarendon Press.
- Cunliffe, Barry, (ed.). 1988. *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath, Vol 2. The Finds from the Sacred Spring*. Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology.
- Dewey, J. 2013. *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church*. Eugene, OR: Cascade.
- Faraone, C. A. 1991. "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells." In *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, edited by Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, 3–32. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Finnegan, Ruth H. 1988. *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gager, John G. 1992. *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gamble, Harry Y. 1995. *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Haines-Eitzen, K. 2002. *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmission of Early Christian Literature*. Oxford: University Press.
- Harris, William V. 1989. *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jaffee, Martin S. 2001. *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE–400 CE*. Oxford: University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195140672.001.0001>.
- Johnson, Lee A. 2016. "Paul's Letters as Artifacts: The Value of the Written Text among Non-Literate People." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 46(1): 25–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107915623197>.

- Johnson, Lee A. 2017. "Paul's Letters Re-Heard: A Performance-Critical Examination of the Preparation, Transportation, and Delivery of Paul's Correspondence." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79(1): 60–76.
- Johnson, William A., and Holt N. Parker. 2009. *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kotansky, R. 1991. "Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets." In *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, edited by Christopher Faraone and Dirk Obbink, 107–37. New York: Oxford.
- Loubser, J. A. (Bobby). 2013. *Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible: Studies on the Media Texture of the New Testament—Explorative Hermeneutics* (2nd ed.) Eugene, OR: Cascade.
- MacMullen, R. 1982. "The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire." *American Journal of Philology* 103: 233–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/294470>.
- Niditch, S. 1996. *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Ong, Walter J. 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203328064>.
- Rhoads, D. 2006. "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part I." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36(4): 118–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014610790603600304>.
- Thomas, R. 1992. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620331>.
- White, John L. 1986. *Light from Ancient Letters*. Philadelphia: Fortress.