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Correcting Iverson's 'Correction'

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My article, 'Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies', addressed several specific, dubious claims and assumptions by some who advocate a 'performance criticism' approach about how texts originated and were used in early Christian circles.[1] Unfortunately, Iverson's putative 'correction' of my article constitutes a misconstrual and consequent misrepresentation of it at a number of points, which does not really advance the discussion. So, in the hope of facilitating a more productive engagement with relevant issues hereafter, in this invited response I have to correct Iverson on several matters.

Perhaps the fundamental problem is that Iverson mistakes my article as if it were some kind of broadside against the entire body of scholars and publications that refer to the 'performance' of texts in early Christianity. He wrongly alleges that I depict performance critics as 'a homogeneous group', that I give 'a distorted portrayal of the *discipline*', and that I overgeneralise 'the *movement*' (emphasis added).[2] But his alarm is misplaced and his allegations are unwarranted. I hoped to have made it perfectly clear that I was addressing problems in the work of '*some* scholars' and '*some* of the crucial claims and inferences' (Abstract), referring to '*some* advocates' (pp. 327, 329 n. 34), and '*some* studies taking a performance criticism approach' (p. 334; emphasis added). Moreover, in the first couple of paragraphs I specify the particular dubious claims in question, and in the first footnote I state the 'precise sense of the term "performance" that I engage' in my article, distinguishing that from other/broader uses of the term 'performance'. So, I really must complain of being misrepresented myself!

1 L. W. Hurtado, 'Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies? "Orality", "Performance" and Reading Texts in Early Christianity', *NTS* 60 (2014) 321–40.

2 I find his terms curious. I associate a 'movement' more with political, social or religious issues, and I rather doubt that the 'performance criticism' emphasis amounts to a new 'discipline'. Do we think of earlier approaches and emphases, such as form-criticism or redaction-criticism, as 'disciplines' in their own right, or are they (and 'performance criticism' now) various developments within the discipline of Biblical (or New Testament) Studies?

To reiterate this point for emphasis, I gave no indication that my article was some sort of comprehensive assessment of 'performance criticism', and I made it rather clear, instead, that my purpose was to correct *certain* claims and assumptions made by *some* of those who identify themselves with this emphasis. Iverson complains that in some other recent performance criticism work there is what he calls 'a more balanced perspective' than that reflected in the views that I engage. I did not claim otherwise, and a balanced perspective is to be welcomed, of course. Indeed, my article was intended to contribute to a more informed and balanced recognition of the interplay of texts and 'orality' in the Greco-Roman period, over against the one-sided emphasis on oral performance that inaccurately depreciates the place of written texts.

I also must object to some statements in Iverson's article as inappropriate, even offensive. He accuses me of erecting 'something of a straw man', an expression that in normal usage suggests that I have intentionally misrepresented those whose work I engage in order to score points. In the next sentence he then further seems to imply that I have not really read the works of the performance advocates that I address. These are rather serious charges against a person's character as a scholar, and they are patently unjust. For, as the copious footnotes to my article will show, the dubious claims that I sought to correct are not invented by me, but appear in the works that I have read and cited. I did not fabricate or distort them, nor did I intend anything other than to correct them.

One of the topics in my article was ancient literacy, and here again, rather than engaging the topic, Iverson hurls inaccurate charges. Contrary to his claim, I do actually distinguish levels and kinds of ancient literacy, by noting for example that perhaps only a small *minority* of people were able to cope *easily* with extended and demanding literary texts, but that the picture is more complex with rich evidence of varying kinds of reading and writing abilities also among 'sub-elite' levels of society (pp. 330–4). Moreover, contra Iverson, I do not really focus on rates of literacy, but instead emphasise the *social diversity* of those who seem to have been able to read and write, albeit at varying levels of facility. So for example I cite Bagnall and others who have studied the evidence of 'everyday writing', noting that it suggests an impressive social spread of reading and writing at social levels beyond the elite classes that we associate with more sophisticated literary texts (pp. 331–3).

To cite the still more recent study by Kristina Milnor, in the Pompeii graffiti we hear 'voices which speak from outside the spaces which produced canonical Roman literature while simultaneously showing a great deal of familiarity with the language used there' and with literary forms that we otherwise associate with elite circles of society. The result, Milnor posits, is that these graffiti require us 'to draw a new and perhaps more comprehensive map of the cultural practices which gave meaning to the lives of the inhabitants of Roman Pompeii'.[3]

3 K. Milnor, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 278.

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The point is precisely that there were gradations of reading ability. For some well-trained readers, reading extended literary texts was no problem at all, and for others it required more preparation and more effort, and they probably could not carry it off with the same panache. But, nevertheless, it appears that significant numbers of people of less-than-elite educational levels made the effort to access some literary texts. So, we should not imagine that it required individuals with elite education to read out texts such as we find in the New Testament in early Christian gatherings.

Indeed, the various 'readers' aids' that I point to as often found in some early manuscripts of Christian biblical texts (pp. 336–7) suggest that these manuscripts were prepared with a view to the needs of sub-elite readers of varying abilities, to help them perform the task of reading these texts out for gathered Christian groups.[4] Contra Iverson, therefore, I do not confuse or conflate elite and sub-elite readers. Nor do I deny at all that texts such as the Gospels and Paul's letters were intended to be read aloud, or that most Christians in that early period experienced these texts through their being read aloud. The point that I actually made was precisely that these texts were *read aloud* from the *manuscripts* in which they were copied. It was neither necessary nor even likely that extended texts such as the Gospels or Epistles had to be delivered from memory, as some have asserted.

Iverson also accuses me of insulating early churches from 'the delivery and performance practices in the wider cultural arena', another claim that I find bizarre given that a major thrust of my article was precisely to contribute information about how texts were actually read in the ancient Greco-Roman period. By 'the wider cultural arena', however, Iverson seems to mean more narrowly the distinctive practices of orators and actors. But this is to ignore both the descriptions of the process of reading texts in pagan and early Christian writings, and the visual depictions of readers and orators, such as the ones that I cite (pp. 334–5). Reading out texts to groups was not the same as delivering an oration or acting out a part in a play, and it is a fallacy to take the latter activities as indicative of the former.

Orators took extensive training to be able to deliver speeches from memory and with effective use of voice and body. Actors likewise trained themselves for the demands of their profession. In neither case are we talking about the reading of texts to a group. Does Iverson really propose that those charged with reading texts in earliest Christian circles were trained orators and actors? Or that they undertook such training in an effort to emulate orators or actors? Or that early Christians expected those who read texts aloud in their circles to exhibit the skills of orators and actors? If so, that would comprise a picture

4 I discuss these features further in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 177–85.

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insulated from what we know of the reading of texts in 'the wider cultural arena'. In any case, what is the evidence for any such supposition (and for the several other dubious claims that I cite in my article)?

To be sure, those who read out texts to groups prepared for this task, familiarising themselves with the texts, identifying places for appropriate intonation, pauses and emphasis. They may also have been responsible for assisting in the understanding of the texts that they read out. Of course, the techniques of persuasion used by orators (from simpler devices such as wordplay to more sophisticated ones that involved structuring an argument) were adapted by ancient writers, as numerous studies have shown, and so effective reading would have involved attending to these devices and attempting to convey them. But I emphasise that the reading of a text in a group setting typically involved use of a written copy, as all the evidence shows. Whether readers sat (as seems typical) or may have stood in some instances (such as in the more formal synagogue settings that Iverson cites), the individuals read from a manuscript.[5]

Iverson claims that I almost completely ignore what he deems 'the primary point of emphasis', that texts were experienced by most of those in a given gathering in oral/aural reception. I do not engage that matter at length because it is not under dispute, as I indicate early in my article (p. 323). The key question addressed in my article is the place of texts, written copies of texts specifically, in early Christianity, because some advocates of 'performance criticism' seem to marginalise the place of texts in their emphasis on 'orality'. Iverson seems to think that it is a 'secondary' matter whether 'manuscripts may or may not have been present' in the oral delivery of texts. But in taking this view, I submit that he reflects the unbalanced treatment of matters, the curious (and unnecessary) minimising of the place of written texts (or indifference towards them) that I sought to correct in my article.

To cite another misconstrual, Iverson takes my reference to the evidence that ancients were capable of silent reading, and of both public and private reading, as intended to suggest 'that the performance of texts was often unnecessary'; but (if the 'performance' of texts means reading them out to a group) I make no

5 Contra Iverson, I have no 'rigid' view about whether readers stood or sat. Parker's insistence that readers were 'always seated' (cited by me, p. 334) applied to the reading of texts in group-settings such as dinners and circles gathered for the reading of literary texts. I acknowledge as a positive contribution Iverson's references to readers apparently standing for the task in synagogues (e.g. Luke 4.16). But, of course, the earliest settings of the Jesus-movement seem to have been homes and other such venues, not the dedicated spaces comprised by synagogue structures. So, it remains more likely that those who read in earliest Christian circles were typically seated. But the posture issue is not really crucial. Nor is it really consequential that in the painting that I cite (p. 335), where a seated person is reading to a group, the reader seems to be pointing to a passage in the opened roll. The point is that he holds and reads from a written text, and is not reciting it from memory or behaving like an actor.

such suggestion. Instead, I simply state that the evidence of silent and private reading refutes the claim (of some performance advocates) that texts were 'only (or even dominantly) read aloud and in groups, and were, thus, merely appendages to "orality"' (p. 327). The textual, visual and artefactual evidence all shows that Roman-era reading of texts included private/personal as well as public reading.[6] Moreover, in the earliest extant Christian manuscripts, we have physical evidence that the texts they contain were studied carefully, probably in sustained close attention by individual readers.[7] But this is not at all to deny that the reading aloud of texts was a frequent (or even typical) feature in earliest Christian circles. I simply note that this was not the only way in which texts were read in the Roman period, by Christians or others. Indeed, as the early Christian copyist practice known as the *nomina sacra* shows, written texts could be prepared with features intended specifically for particular visual effects (as I note in my article, pp. 337–8).

There is, however, a curious tension in Iverson's article on the question of how written texts functioned in early Christian circles. On the one hand, he insists that 'memorised delivery is not a cornerstone of performance-critical research'. But, on the other hand, there is Iverson's indifferent attitude towards whether manuscripts were read (cited earlier), and his preference for referring to the 'recitation' of texts (which in ordinary English usage connotes delivery from memory).[8] Iverson's statements seem to me to suggest a remaining tendency to emphasise oral delivery of texts at the expense of (or with an indifference towards) their written form, a reluctance to recognise that the oral reading of texts was typically from written copies.

I reiterate that it is right to emphasise that literary texts were typically composed with a view to their oral effect (whether read silently or in groups).[9] It is also clear that texts such as the Gospels and Paul's Epistles were experienced orally/aurally by many more people than those who read the texts. It is valid, therefore, to urge that our reading of New Testament texts should include attention to their oral qualities, in order to help us to engage those texts more fully and

6 See e.g. the Roman-era visual depictions of 'Der isoliert Lesende', in T. Birt, *Die Buchrolle in der Kunst: Archäologisch-antiquarische Untersuchungen zum antiken Buchwesen* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1907) 155–71.

7 As an illustration, note the paragraph markers inserted by an early reader/user of *P.Oxy.* 654 (a personal copy of the Gospel of Thomas from the third century CE). Also, in another publication I note variants in Acts that seem to reflect close exegetical activity by early Christian readers: 'God or Jesus? Textual Ambiguity and Textual Variants in Acts of the Apostles', *Texts and Traditions: Essays in Honour of J. Keith Elliott* (ed. P. Doble and J. Kloha (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 239–54.

8 Granted, the English word 'recitation' derives from the Latin *recitatio*, which typically means the reading aloud of a written text. But Iverson uses the English term, not the Latin one.

9 A ready example is 1 Cor 3.21–3, with the rhyming words (e.g. Παῦλος/Ἀπολλῶς, Χριστοῦ/Θεοῦ), repetition of words with same initial letter (Κηφᾶς/Κόσμος), and the drum-beat of repeated εἴτε phrases.

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to enhance our sense of how early Christians experienced them. In that oral enjoyment of texts, however, early Christians were essentially people of their time. There was nothing particularly distinctive in this, however much it may require adjustment by modern scholars to take early Christian orality into account.

But in the various ways in which written texts featured in early Christianity we have something truly noteworthy that will be missed if we portray 'performance' in the misleading ways that I sought to correct in my article. For example, written texts were 'performed', i.e. read out in group settings, but (contra some claims) this did not require them to be memorised. It was the written text that was read out ('performed' in that sense). Nor were texts such as Mark composed in 'oral performance'. Our appreciation of 'orality' should go hand in hand with a due appreciation of the major place of written texts in early Christian circles.

For if we take stock of the number of texts composed by early Christians, the practice of reading texts as a part of corporate early Christian worship, and the energies devoted to copying and disseminating written copies of texts, we see something truly phenomenal, even astonishing.[10] Indeed, it appears that the early Christian investment in written texts even generated a distinctive preference for the codex at a point when in the wider culture the literary roll remained the supreme book-form.[11] The early Christian manuscript was not simply a copy of a text, some sort of script to be memorised and then set aside. Each copy (however humble or skilled in execution) involved considerable effort, and the distribution of copies involved further effort and expense. Moreover, at least in the case of copies of texts prepared for public reading (as scripture), early Christian manuscripts appear to have had physical and visual significance in their own right. Certain words (*nomina sacra*) were set off visually from the surrounding text, and especially in the case of early Christian copies of their scriptural texts they were embodied in the book-form that Christians particularly preferred for those texts.

So I hope to have corrected Iverson's misconstrual of my article, and I also hope now that scholarly discussion of 'orality' and 'textuality' in early Christianity can proceed on a more informed basis and with due recognition that we need to take full account of various activities without confusing them: strictly oral performance (e.g. preaching), the 'performance' of written texts (reading aloud to groups), and the place of reading and study of texts as well.

10 For example, I reckon that we know of some 200 or more books composed in early Christian circles in the first three centuries CE. See e.g. C. Moreschini and E. Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History*, vol. I: *From Paul to the Age of Constantine* (trans. M. J. O'Connell; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005).

11 H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) remains essential on the heavy investment in writings in early Christianity. I have discussed the early Christian preference for the codex in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 43–93, with copious references to earlier scholarly work.