The Art of Listening in the Gospel of Matthew and Paul's Letter to the Romans

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Abstract:
This revised lecture highlights two aspects of listening in the Bible, that of listening as an obedient act of confession according to the Gospel of Matthew and that of listening to and interpreting the oral performance of Paul's letter to the Romans. The former aspect is specific to the socio-religious commitment in ancient Israel and Judaism, including the Jewish Christ-believers, and identifies this particular act of listening regardless of the oral mode communication and with a focus on the Jewish Shemaʿ. It is argued this confession serves as the interpretative key to several Matthean texts, being an important means of incorporating the Jewish notion of obedience into the early Christian understanding of Jesus' obedience to his Father and the disciples' obedience to Jesus and to God. This, in turn, indicates the importance of the confession elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in Paul's insistence that Jews and Gentiles together owe their love and obedience to the one and only God. The latter aspect reflects the broad Greek and Roman sensitivity to the oral character of the written text and focuses on the interpretive clues of orality encoded into the writing and decoded at the moment of its public reading and hearing. The two examples from Paul's letter to the Romans are on the awareness of how ancient experts on performance dealt with sound and the combination of cola into periods, illustrating that attention to the aural impact of texts helps the interpreter to enter into the sounding-setting of the first audience and fosters sensitivity to both the cumulative aural effects of sounding syllables and words as well as to the aural

syntax of structuring the linkage between individual clauses. As is evident especially in the complex problem of Rom 9:5 if Christ is seen as God or not, the sound analysis has potential to solve crucial theological issues and, in addition, to provide historically based hermeneutics and theology.

Key Words:
Gospel of Matthew, letter to the Romans, Shemaʿ, listening/hearing, confession, performance, orality, aurality, sound analysis, Matthew 4:1–11, Romans 9:3–5, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Pseudo-Demetrius, Quintilian, reception-history, hermeneutics

Introduction

The art of listening was a multifaceted phenomenon in ancient Greek and Roman antiquity. The well-known historian Thucydides, for instance, active in the fifth century BCE, was aware that historical material consists of words that were spoken (τὰ λεχθέντα) and deeds that occurred (τὰ ἔργα) and divided the sources into that which could be registered through the ear and that which could be registered through sight (1.11.1–2). The rhetoricians, somewhat later, favored oral performance for the sake of persuasion, despite their use of written notes. Cicero (106–43 BCE) insisted that history needs the voice of the orator in order to argue a case and make history immortal (*De Orat*. 2.9.36) and that the end of rhetoric eloquence is to persuade by speech (*De Inv.* 1.5.6). The advice of Quintilian (5–96 CE) was that the orator should avoid using note-books at the oral performance and commit everything to memory in order to be utterly convincing to those listening (*Inst*. 10.7.32). Many other ancient texts could be mentioned that testify to the predominance of the oral and aural form of communication. Ordinary people were mostly unable to read and had to appropriate texts by listening to them being read aloud in different settings, such as the theater, the public square or at home.[1]

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It is evident that the people in ancient Israel and in the early Christian communities shared this broad appreciation of the oral form of communication and of listening. I will elucidate two selected aspects of this essentially cultural phenomenon, that of listening as an obedient act of confession according to the Gospel of Matthew and that of listening to and interpreting the oral performance of Paul's letter to the Romans. The former aspect is specific to the socio-religious commitment in ancient Israel and Judaism, including the Jewish Christ-believers, and identifies this particular act of listening regardless of the oral mode communication; the latter reflects the broad Greek and Roman sensitivity to the oral character of the written text indicated above and highlights the interpretive clues of orality encoded into the writing.

Listening as Obedience: The Shemaʿ and the Gospel of Matthew

Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and the Shemaʿ

The classic text of listening in the Bible is the well-known confession in Deut 6:4:

> שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד
> ἄκουε Ισραηλ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστιν
> Hear, Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The Shemaʿ Yisrael, or simply the Shemaʿ, has been the most crucial Jewish confession through-out the centuries. It appears in a collection of speeches attributed to Moses before the next generation of people entered into the promised land, constituting the decisive call to unreserved love for God. In traditional Jewish prayer these lines from Deut 6:4 were prayed together with the following verses morning and evening and became one of the most influential identity markers in Jewish history. In later liturgy the Shemaʿ included in addition to Deut 6:4–9 also Deut

[1] Usually the literacy rate in ancient Greece and Rome is estimated to circa 10%. See William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1989, who allows for local variations. For Palestine during the Roman period specifically, cf. Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001, arguing against earlier studies that the Jewish society in Palestine was characterized by a low level of literacy.

11:13–21 and Num 15:37–41 (m. Ber. 2:2) and its recitation was seen as a means of receiving or taking upon oneself the Kingdom of Heaven.

The characteristic opening line "hear, Israel" does not simply mean to let the sound waves enter the ears. The word שְׁמַע/ἄκουε here implies the process of allowing the words of the confession to impose understanding and generate an obligatory response to the one true God. The command that follows in Deut 9:5 is threefold, to love with your whole heart, with your whole soul and with all your strength, and formed in ancient Israel the fundamental covenantal bound of love and obedience to God.

In the reception history of this confession, the initial command to listen disappears and the focus is directed to the threefold command. We find references to it in different places in the Hebrew Bible as well as in early Jewish texts and the focus is consistently on the oneness of God.[2] It came to encapsulate the monotheistic essence of Jewish belief. In early rabbinic times, when the Shemaʿ was the crucial declaration of obedience to the Kingdom of Heaven, the confession surfaces in a way indicating a significant attention to the deepest meaning of what it means to truly follow its command. The Mishnah, while not paying much attention to the initial reference to listening, interprets its threefold command in Ber. 9:5 saying that you should love God,

בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ, בִּשְׁנֵי יְצָרֶיךָ, בְּיֵצֶר טוֹב וּבְיֵצֶר רָע
וּבְכָל נַפְשֶׁךָ, אֲפִלּוּ הוּא נוֹטֵל אֶת נַפְשֶׁךָ
וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ, בְּכָל מָמוֹנֶךָ
דָּבָר אַחֵר בְּכָל מְאֹדֶךָ, בְּכָל מִדָּה וּמִדָּה שֶׁהוּא מוֹדֵד לְךָ הֱוֵי מוֹדֶה לוֹ בְּמִאֹד מְאֹד׃

'with all your heart', with both your inclinations, with the good inclination and with the evil inclination;
'with all your soul', even though he takes your soul;
'with all your might', with all your property.
Another saying: 'with all your might', with whatever measure he measures out for you, bring to him an overflowing thanksgiving.

[2] E.g. 2 Kgs 19:19; Zech 14:9; Mal 2:9; 2 Macc 7:37–38; 1QH 14:26; 15:10; Let. Aris. 132; Philo, *Spec.* 1.30; Josephus *A.J.* 4.199; *C. Ap.* 2.193.

This interpretation is found in a more developed form in Sifre to Deuteronomy Pisqa' 32, and it is implied in both Targum Onkelos and Targum Yerushalmi (Ps.-Jonathan). Taken together, these texts suggest that your heart must not be divided in the love of God, that you must be prepared to give up your soul/life in martyrdom, and that you must place all your possessions at God's disposal. To listen truly to what God commands is an act of deepest religious commitment and radical obedience in the most crucial matters of life and death.

Although the questions concerning the redaction and dating of Sifre and the Targumim are difficult to determine with certainty, the Targum Yerushalmi surely being considerably later than the other two, the detailed explanations of the Shemaʿ in the Mishnah as well as the reports that the priests in the temple recited it (m. Tamid 4:3; 5:1) and that the early tannaitic houses of Shammai and Hillel fervently discussed it (m. Ber. 1:3), indicate that this radicalization of the confession existed early, probably in the first century CE.[3] Although the listening motif is not very prominent as such in the reception history of Deut 6:4–5, it lurks in the background as an urgent call to total obedience to the one true God.

Listening and Obedience to the Shemaʿ in the Gospel of Matthew

It should come as no surprise that Jesus himself and many of his followers, who were all deeply grounded in Jewish piety, show signs of their commitment to what the Shemaʿ demands.[4] In all likelihood, Jesus and most of his disciples recited it in their morning and evening prayer, just as Paul and many of his Jewish associates might have done before and perhaps also after they came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Al-

[3] Cf. also Josephus, *A.J.* 4:212–213, implicitly referring to the Shemaʿ.

[4] For some more extensive studies pointing to the Shemaʿ in certain New Testament passages, cf. Birger Gerhardsson, *The Shema in the New Testament: Deut 6:4–5 in Significant Passages*, Lund: Novapress 1996, where he collects his previous articles on the subject, and more recently Erik Waaler, *The Shema and The First Commandment in First Corinthians: An Intertextual Approach to Paul's Re-Reading of Deuteronomy*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008; Brury Eko Saputra, *The* Shema *and John 10: The Importance of the* Shema *In Understanding the Oneness Language In John 10*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock 2019; John J. R. Lee, *Christological Rereading of the Shema (Deut 6:4) in Mark's Gospel*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2020.

though the New Testament does not dwell explicitly on this, the fundamental and enduring Jewishness of Jesus and his followers makes it highly probable.

The Shemaʿ plays a particularly important role in the Gospel of Matthew, albeit beneath the surface of the text, in fact functioning as a subtle interpretive key for unlocking the motif of true obedience and elaborating the motif of listening. This Gospel, probably composed during the 80s when the Jewish religious movements were struggling to find their identity after the destruction of their temple and its cult, includes a characteristic emphasis on listening and a sophisticated use of the Shemaʿ. The Jewish author and the Jewish audience(s) of this Gospel, whoever they were,[5] had most likely internalized the Shemaʿ as a confession recited every morning and evening in Hebrew or Greek, perhaps even in other languages.[6] It was the cognitive religious lens through which they understood their entire existence and according to which they had to interpret the new messianic situation.

The author is fond of the Greek verb for listening (ἀκούειν) and uses it approximately 63 times, in various ways, not always in explicit conjunction with the Shemaʿ.[7] Of interest is that Jesus speaks in 7:24, 26 of hearing and doing his words presented in the Sermon on the Mount. These two references hark back to 7:15–23, where it is evident that hearing and doing must go hand in hand, just as in the Shemaʿ. Much later in the story, the scribes and the pharisees are harshly criticized precisely for not acting in accordance with their own teaching (23:3), to the extent that they are rejected as Jewish teachers and replaced by Jesus only

[5] Although I am convinced that the author understood himself an ethnic Jew, I find it difficult to argue that he belonged to the same community as the intended addressees of the Gospel and remain open to the possibility of several intended audiences. Cf. the rehearsal of this influential debate in Edward W. Klink III (ed.), *The Audience of the Gospels: Further Conversation about the Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*, London: Clark 2010. The debate has unfortunately become polarized in the recent studies of the Gospel of Matthew.

[6] Y. Sota 21b mentions that the Shemaʿ was recited in Greek at Caesarea. M. Sota 7:1; t. Sota 7:7 refer to "any other language."

[7] For statistics and further analysis, see my *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Gospel of Matthew*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994, 300–302, 321–324, 361–364.

(23:8–10). Hearing, and also doing, relate more substantially to the beginning of the Shemaʿ elsewhere in Matthew. In 22:37 the author has Jesus quoting Deut 6:5 as a response to the pharisees' attempt to test (πειράζειν) him. Jesus acknowledges it more strongly than in the other Synoptics as the most important command in the Torah.

The author also seems to use the Shemaʿ to interpret Jesus' obedience to God and the disciples' obedience to Jesus. Most evident is that Jesus' obedience to God is in fact evidence of his obedience to the Shemaʿ. The pharisees' desire to tempt Jesus is foreshadowed already at the initial portrayal of Jesus in the narrative, in the pericope of his so-called temptation in 4:1–11. The author here describes how Jesus' obedience was decisively tested (πειράζειν) before the beginning of his active ministry and employs his deeply felt obligation towards the Shemaʿ as the interpretive key to the testing of Jesus, presenting Jesus' conformity to God's will as the radical and unreserved obedience to the Shemaʿ as it was understood at the author's own time. This has been convincingly shown in one of Birger Gerhardsson's early and most prolific but much neglected studies.[8] Gerhardsson here observes that all the quotations in Matt 4:1–11 are from Deut 6–8 and argues the intriguing thesis that the portrayal of the testing of Jesus as the Son of God is in fact a midrashic exposition of the Shemaʿ.

The first temptation is hunger for forty days, just as God allowed his people to go hungry for forty years and then fed them with heavenly food. Unlike the people in the desert, Jesus overcomes the temptation and shows that the evil inclination has no power over him and that he loves God with his whole heart. The second temptation concerns safety, that Jesus should remain uninjured no matter what happens. The people of Israel had doubts about God's protection. Jesus, by contrast, shows that he is prepared to give up his life if God demands it. The third temptation has to do with worldly possessions. Israel had fallen for this temptation. Jesus rejects it and proves that he loves God also with his whole might. When tested if he is truly the Son of God, Jesus thus proves that he loves God by allowing God's word and not the evil inclination to reign his heart, by acknowledging God to decide over his life, and by

[8] *The Testing of God's Son (Matt 4:1–11 & Par): An Analysis of an Early Christian Midrash*, Lund: Gleerup 1966.

renouncing all the properties of this world for the service of God.[9] He is, according to Matthew, true to his daily confession of obedient listening to the only true God and his demands.

The question of the disciples' obedience to Jesus is more complex and touches on the ambivalent and much debated Christology of the Gospel. This debate rarely if ever takes into account the possibility of allusions to the Shemaʿ,[10] perhaps due to the reluctance to consider the implications of the fact that this thoroughly Jewish Gospel put a strong messianic focus on one particular teacher among the plurality of teachers in contemporary Judaism and end narratively by resolving the limited range of Jesus' mission in 10:5–6, 23 with a more inclusive one in 28:19.[11] The recent but not novel idea of understanding the Gospel of Matthew from a Jewish sectarian perspective similar to the specific adherence to the Righteous Teacher according to some of the Dead Sea Scrolls opens up possibilities of appreciating the strong emphasis on Jesus' extraordinary status in this Gospel without necessarily diminishing the Jewishness of the writing.[12]

The yoke of Jesus in 11:29 is significant. The author's use of this image is influenced by the terminology and motif concerning the yoke of Wisdom in Sir 6:23–31; 51:26, as most scholars recognize.[13] What is rarely noticed, however, is that Sir 6:24–26, when referring to the fetters (πέδαι) or collar (κλοιός) or bonds (δεσμοί) of Wisdom, makes a close

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[9] Gerhardsson, *The Testing*, 76–79. Gerhardsson refers also to Heb 4:15 as an example of how an early Christian author thought of the temptation of Jesus. The similarities to Matthew are striking.

[10] Cf. my *Jesus the Only Teacher*, 301–302

[11] For a detailed argument, see Matthias Konradt, *Israel, Kirche und die Völker im Matthäusevangelium*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2007, 285–348.

[12] I made this comparison in *Jesus the Only Teacher*, 114–132, 148–155, 188–193. For a recent, sectarian understanding of the Matthean group based on a comparison with the Dead Sea Scrolls, cf. John Kampen, *Matthew within Sectarian Judaism*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2019. The Christology as well as the biographical genre of the Gospel require, in my view, further thought in order to be integrated into a view of an entirely Jewish identity of the group from which the Gospel emerged and to which it was presumably addressed, granted that Jewish identity remains a flexible category.

[13] See Celia Deutsch, *Hidden Wisdom and the Easy Yoke: Wisdom, Torah and Discipleship in Matthew 11.25–30*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1987.

connection to the Shemaʿ, exhorting the student to draw near to Wisdom "with all your soul" (ἐν πάσῃ ψυχῇ σου) and to keep her ways "with all your power" (ἐν ὅλῃ δυνάμει σου), a quite clear way of linking the adherence to Wisdom and her yoke to obedience to the Shemaʿ. In rabbinic literature the connection between the yoke and the Shemaʿ is explicit and well-known: when a person recited the Shemaʿ, s/he in fact accepted the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven – Matthew's favorite expression for the Kingdom of God – and the yoke of the commandments.[14] In Matthew, the yoke is not that of Wisdom or that of the Kingdom of Heaven, but that of Jesus' teaching. The conclusion that follows suggests a prolific Christology: in 11:29 Jesus invites the disciples to learn his teaching, and in doing this they obey in fact the Shemaʿ and its commandments, implying a strong focus on who he is and what he teaches. Adding to this is the possibility argued long ago by both Felix Christ and, most convincingly, M. Jack Suggs that the author of Matthew in fact understood Jesus to be Wisdom, not only her messenger.[15] A cautious way of expressing the impression we gain from this discussion is that when Jesus invites people to himself and his own yoke he in fact assumes the functions of Wisdom herself and calls people to adhere to the Shemaʿ.

In addition to these passages, we have a significant use of the phrase εἷς ἐστιν in Matthew, perhaps alluding to "the Lord is one" in the Shemaʿ. "There is only one who is good," is Jesus' response in 19:17 to the question of what to do to inherit eternal life. Although the text is not entirely clear, it is probable that Jesus is referring to God rather than to himself, not in this case drawing attention to his own person. More prominent and thought-provoking is the threefold εἷς ἐστιν in 23:8–10: "one is your teacher", "one is your father," "one is your guide." The

[14] Cf. e.g. m. Ber 2:2, 5; b. Ber. 61b. For discussion, see Hans-Jürgen Becker, *Auf der Kathedra des Mose: Rabbinisch-theologisches Denken und anti-rabbinische Polemik in Matthäus 23, 1–12*, Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum 1990, 145–146, 161–164.

[15] Felix Christ, *Jesus Sophia: Die Sophia-Christologie bei den Synoptikern*, Zürich: Zwingli Verlag 1970; M. Jack Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology, and the Law in Matthew's Gospel*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1970. This view has been reinforced by Deutsch, *Hidden Wisdom*; eadem, "Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol," *Novum Testamentum* 32 (1990), 13–47. Deutsch goes as far as to claiming that in Matthew Jesus is Wisdom personified.

expression here oscillates between Jesus and God as the only one. Regardless of how exactly to define Jesus' status in Matthew, it is evident that the same theologically loaded phrase can be used both for God and for Jesus in the same pericope. The three-fold repetition of it, culminating with a reference to the Messiah as the only guide, has a strong rhetorical impact and cannot but remind the pious Greek-speaking Jewish author and listener of the confessional introduction to the three-fold Shemaʿ, ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστιν.

The implication of all this is that the classical confessional act of listening was important as a means of incorporating the Jewish notion of obedience into the early Christian understanding of Jesus' obedience to his Father and the disciples' obedience to Jesus and to God. Although we cannot here discuss the importance of the confession elsewhere in the New Testament, it is immediately evident that it influenced from early on the understanding of Jesus relationship to God and pointed out the basic directives for good behavior (Mark 12:29; James 2:19). It is significant that Paul uses the commandment of love several times (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14). The notion that God is one also serves as an axiomatic and non-negotiable statement in his otherwise complex lines of argumentation. His messianic conviction that the Jewish covenant includes the Gentiles is based on his Jewish belief that God is one. God is not only the God of the Jews but also of the Gentiles, because God is one, he says in Rom 3:30, after a complicated argument about the righteousness of God for all.[16] Other passages confirm the importance the Shemaʿ had for Paul (1 Cor 8:6; Gal 3:20). The earliest Jewish theological thinker in Christianity from whom we have texts probably continued to confess it every day, reciting the command to listen morning and evening and integrating it into his messianic and apocalyptic theology.

Listening as Interpreting Oral Performance: Paul's Letter to the Romans

Performance Criticism and Beyond

The other aspect of listening in the Bible is less religious but equally intriguing: the interpretive act of listening to a text being read aloud. It is

[16] See more extensively my *Romarbrevet 1–8*, Stockholm: EFS-förlaget 2006, 106.

common knowledge today that the New Testament writings have a strong rhetorical dimension, both technically and effectively, and that they were composed for persuasive oral performance, regardless of the specific literary genre that they exhibit.

The analysis of oral performance has been labeled yet another "criticism" of New Testament studies.[17] During the last decade it has been widely employed as a means of understanding the dynamic dimension of textual composition and oral performance as well as the audible reception of text and performance, and as such it has already been criticized on account of its neglect to incorporate the ancient recommendations of oral performance from memory or from a manuscript with its small notes of how the writing should be communicated.[18] Dan Nässelqvist has studied this extensively in his dissertation from Lund University, criticizing the previous trend of performance criticism and elaborating the idea of sound analysis in order to grasp the impact that the reading had on small groups of people listening to the performance of written manuscripts.[19] His study proposes an analysis of the "soundscape" of John 1–4, indicating the broader implications of this new scholarly attention to sound in narrative performance.

Listening to Paul's Letter to the Romans

The Biblical study of letters has paid much attention to the rhetorical and epistolary conventions in antiquity. Despite this interest, scholars have not to the same extent studied the profound significance of the well-known fact that letters of the kind we have in the New Testament were composed through detailed or more flexible oral dictation and read aloud in settings where the author was absent. To be sure, we have realized that the secretary played an important role – in Rom 16:22 he is

[17] The pioneering appeal to performance criticism was David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part I," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36 (2006), 118–133; idem, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part II," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36 (2006), 164–184.
[18] Larry W. Hurtardo, "Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies? 'Orality', 'Performance' and Reading Texts in Early Christianity," *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014), 321–340.
[19] *Public Reading in Early Christianity: Lectors, Manuscript, and Sound in the Oral Delivery of John 1–4*, Leiden: Brill 2015.

prominent enough to give a personal greeting by name;[20] we have indeed realized that the letter was considered to be a friendly conversation on a distance between two persons, especially if the letter was a personal one, or that is was like a persuasive speech, in full awareness that the author needed to express himself with clarity not being himself present;[21] and we have integrated into our conception of the letters that they seemed to replace the presence of the author when performed to the audience.[22] Letters were composed orally and meant to be read aloud to an audience at some distance from and yet in a way close to the author.

More rarely do we integrate this media perspective into the actual interpretation of the letters, neglecting to see how much the message depends on the form of communication. The two book-length studies of the Pauline letters from the perspective of orality by John D. Harvey and Casey W. Davis, published rather long ago, reflect the present state of research on the letters and deal with the oral patterns to be identified, but they remain within the paradigm of ancient rhetoric and neglect the importance of sound almost entirely.[23] The long-standing expert on orality Pieter J. J. Botha deals in his more recent study with Paul and his

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[20] E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1991. Cf. also idem, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity 2004.

[21] We find this in the theoretical writings on letter-writing collected by Abraham J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1988. Cf. e.g. Cicero's statement in his letter to Atticus that he writes the letter "because I feel as though I were talking to you" (*Ep. Att*. 12.53), while also realizing that the letter was not a *tête-à-tête* talk (*Ep. Fam*. 12.30.1), or Seneca stating that "my letters should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another's company or taking walks together – spontaneous and easy" (*Ep Mor*. 75.1–2). The special clarity required by a letter-writer is mentioned several times by the theorists.

[22] The classic study is Robert Funk, "The Apostolic *Parousia*: Form and Significance," in W. M. Farmer, C. F. D Moule and R. R. Niebuhr (eds), *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1967, 249–269. On occasion, Paul might have preferred the letter to the personal visit. Cf. Margaret Mitchell, "New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: The Example of Timothy and Titus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992), 641–662.

[23] John D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters*, Grand Rapids: Baker 1998; Casey W. Davis, *Oral Biblical Criticism: The Influence of the Principles of Orality*

letters mostly from the general perspective that an oral culture gives to the epistolary genre.[24] Generally speaking, it seems that our study of orality has developed further in studies of the gospels and the gospel tradition than in the study of the letters. It remains, for instance, to interpret Paul's letter to the Romans from a perspective informed by the complexity of the oral and aural media in the mid 50s, considering that Paul was aware that he addressed people gathered in house-communities that he had never visited and that he depended entirely on the epistolary medium to make up for his absence. In this letter in particular, he is at pains for not having had the possibility to visit them previously and eager to make contact in order to find a basis for his continued mission (Rom 1:10–13; 15:22–29).

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Paul uses all his literary and theological training and experience to communicate effectively and persuasively in Romans. Scholars have shown the strong rhetorical character of the letter at large;[25] and the rather independent combination of rhetorical and epistolary conventions is evident also in some detail.[26] The audible impact of the performance needs however more scrutiny. Two examples of how the text might have been intended to be heard, and in fact perhaps was heard at the first moment of oral reading, suffice here.

The first one concerns the rather simple way of identifying and constructing sound as an interpretive sign by looking for the similar audible effects between vowels or consonants in words or syllables, often in combination, the so-called assonance and consonance. This audible impact could vary, indeed, depending on what sounds that were used, but

on the Literary Structure of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999. Davis pays some attention to the importance of sound, but not in terms of the ancient recommendations for how to use sound.

[24] *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2012.

[25] Cf. e.g. Neil Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul's Dialogue with Judaism*, Minneapolis: Fortress 2007; Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Minneapolis: Fortress 2007.

[26] Cf. e.g. my "Epistolography, Rhetoric and Letter Prescript: Romans 1.1–7 as a Test Case," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 65 (1997), 27–46.

as a general rule for interpreting such passages it might be more adequate to listen to the text and its audible effects than to philologically separate lexicographical word-meaning.

A straight-forward example is Rom 1:29–31. As elsewhere in his writings, Paul here uses and modifies a traditional catalogue of vices and describes how God delivered men and women to deplorable ways of thinking and acting. He includes into the passage some specific sound-effects:

> 29 πεπληρωμένους πάσῃ ἀδικί**ᾳ** πονηρί**ᾳ** πλεονεξί**ᾳ** κακί**ᾳ**,
> μεστοὺς **φθόνου φόνου** ἔριδος δόλου κακοηθείας,
> ψιθυριστάς,
> 30 καταλάλους, θεοστυγεῖς, ὑβριστάς, ὑπερηφάνους,
> ἀλαζόνας, ἐφευρετὰς κακῶν, γονεῦσιν ἀπειθεῖς,
> 31 **ἀσυνέτους, ἀσυνθέτους, ἀσ**τόργους, **ἀ**νελεήμονα**ς**.
>
> 29 They were filled with every kind of **wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice**. Full of **envy, murder**, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips,
> 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents,
> 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (NRSV)

The Greek sound-effects are lost in translation, and only rarely do translations include considerations of these effects.[27] As seen above, the translation of the New Revised Standard Version remains within the lexicographical paradigm of determining the meaning of words, overlooking the strong aural impact of the Greek terms. Similarly, the latest Swedish translation, though with a certain aural sensitivity indicated with the repeated "-het" in 1:29 and "-lösa" in 1:31:

> 29 uppfyllda av allt slags **orättfärdighet**, **elakhet**, **själviskhet** och **ondska**, fulla av **avund**, **blodtörst**, stridslystnad, svek och illvilja. De skvallrar

[27] But cf. James A. Maxey and Ernst R. Wendland, *Translating Scripture for Sound and Performance: New Directions in Biblical Studies*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2012.

> [30] och baktalar. De föraktar Gud. De är fräcka, övermodiga och skrytsamma, uppfinningsrika i det onda, uppstudsiga mot sina föräldrar,
> [31] tanklösa, trolösa, kärlekslösa, hjärtlösa.

When listening to the text, however, there appears to be no significant difference in meaning between ἀδικίᾳ πονηρίᾳ πλεονεξίᾳ κακίᾳ, translated "wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice"; there is no substantial difference to be heard between φθόνου φόνου translated "envy, murder"; and there appears to be no significant difference between ἀσυνέτους, ἀσυνθέτους, ἀστόργους, ἀνελεήμονας, translated "foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." Such catalogues of vices were common in Greek moral writings – already from Plato's time in the fourth century BCE and onward – and had its place also in Jewish writings.[28] Their sole generic purpose was that of describing the evil character of men and women. Just as we have become accustomed to seek for the meaning of terms according to their domain of semantically related terms found in similar genres of texts,[29] we might also take seriously the audible impression of words and syllables when identifying the actual meaning-effects, as difficult as it might seem. In this case, Paul encoded into the text strong signals of its oral performance. The performer in the small Roman house-community had come to a climax, perhaps raising his voice, stating emphatically that God has decided that they all deserve death.[30] The attentive listeners received thus a decisive impression of what a truly deprived human being is.

To be noted is the quality of sound in the passage. Nässelqvist develops previous attempts to describe sound-quality and points out that θ, φ and χ were considered harsh letters and that a too frequent use of σ,

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[28] The classic study is Anton Vögtle, *Die Tugend- und Lasterkataloge im Neuen Testament*, Münster: Aschendorff, 1938, arguing that the ethical lists in the New Testament are indebted to stoicism. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls added new examples of such catalogues from a Jewish – and indirectly perhaps Iranian – perspective. Cf. Siegfried Wibbing, *Die Tugend- und Lasterkataloge im Neuen Testament und ihre Traditionsgeschichte unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung der Qumran-Texte*, Berlin: Töpelmann, 1959.

[29] Johannes Louw and Eugene A. Nida (eds), *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, New York: United Bible Societies 1988.

[30] It is debated who "they" are, Gentiles only or both Jews and Gentiles. I have argued for the latter option in *Romarbrevet 1–8*, 45.

ξ and ψ were considered dissonant due to the hissing sound they evoke.[31] We notice that the similarity of sound in φθόνου φόνου is created by the deplorable use of both φ and θ. The hissing sounds are prominent through-out our passage, with a dissonant climax in 9:31: ἀ**σ**υνέτου**ς**, ἀ**σ**υνθέτου**ς**, ἀ**σ**τόργου**ς**, ἀνελεήμονα**ς**. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (c. 60 BCE–7 CE), historian and literary expert, pointed out that such hissing sounds created dissonance and were offensive when used excessively "A hiss seems a sound more suited to a brute beast than to a rational being" (*Comp*. 14). There were, he continues, writers who composed entire odes without using such sounds. As it seems, Paul played with the sounds in Rom 1:29–31 not only by creating assonance and consonance but also by using sounds that created feelings of offence and disgust in order to enforce his point concerning the deprived human being.

Let us turn to the more theologically challenging text in Rom 9:4–5. Scholars have long debated the reference of θεός in 9:5 and the possibility that Paul here actually refers explicitly to Christ as God. No one has to date given attention to the oral and aural features of the text. Serious consideration of these features gives however new clues for interpretation. The text is well structured and certainly aimed for oral performance:

> 4 οἵτινές εἰσιν Ἰσραηλῖται, ὧν ἡ υἱοθεσία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ αἱ διαθῆκαι καὶ ἡ νομοθεσία καὶ ἡ λατρεία καὶ αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι,
> 5 ὧν οἱ πατέρες καὶ ἐξ ὧν ὁ χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα ὁ ὢν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας ἀμήν.
>
> 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;
> 5 to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (NRSV)

[31] Nässelqvist, *Public Reading*, 154. Nässelqvist builds on and partly corrects Margaret Ellen Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping in the New Testament*, Salem: Polebridge 2009.

Many if not the majority of scholars argue today that we here find a text – the only one – where Paul calls Christ God,[32] adopting the edition of the Greek text that puts a comma after κατὰ σάρκα. The standard commentary by Robert Jewett in the influential Hermeneia series provides an illustration of the common trend: "If salvation results from calling on the 'name of the Lord' (10:13), then the salvation of 'all Israel' in 11:26 would entail their recognition that Jesus is 'really God over all things'."[33] The argument is circular, indicated with the initial "if." Translations reflect a similar position. The New Revised Standard Version translates accordingly (see above). Similarly, though not with the capital for θεός, the latest Swedish translation: "och från dem kommer Kristus som människa, han som är över allting, gud, välsignad i evighet, amen."

There are several options available concerning the punctuation of this passage. The editors of the latest edition of the Greek New Testament has a comma after κατὰ σάρκα, producing the translation suggested by the New Revised Standard Version. If we instead insert a full stop after ἐπὶ πάντων, we translate "Messiah according to the flesh, who is over everything. God be blessed forever." Or if we instead insert a full stop after κατὰ σάρκα, we translate "Messiah according to the flesh. God, who is over everything, be blessed forever." Paul would in none of these two cases claim that the Messiah is God.

There are many philological and theological arguments in either direction, most of them well-known and repeated in commentaries. The most decisive consideration is perhaps that blessings are usually directed to God, also in Paul's letters. It is true that blessings are mostly not stated as independent clauses but related to a previous clause, such as in Rom 1:25; 11:36 and elsewhere. But independent blessings are common in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish literature, also in Greek, and Paul himself and his followers use such blessings (2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3).[34] It is also true that the term "blessing" is often placed before rather than after the reference to God. But the significance of word-order is difficult

[32] So e.g. George Carraway, *Christ is God over all: Romans 9:5 in the context of Romans 9:1–11*, London: Bloomsbury 2013. Carraway calls his method simply "exegetical" (19) and fails to add insights from new interpretative strategies.

[33] *Romans*, 564. Jewett holds this to be the majority position among scholars.

[34] Cf. LXX Gen 9:26; 1 Sam (LXX 1 Kgs) 25:32; Pss 28:6 (LXX 27:6); 31:21 (LXX 30:22); 41:13 (LXX 40:14); 68:20 (LXX 67:20). For the New Testament, cf. also Luke 1:68; 1 Pet 1:3.

to estimate in Greek and we do find in LXX Ps 67:19 a blessing of God with a different word-order, κύριος ὁ θεὸς εὐλογητός. We should remember that elsewhere in the New Testament this type of blessing is directed to God, not the Messiah.

The blessing here ends the section starting in 9:1 with an emphatic statement that Paul is not lying, "I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying." In 2 Cor 11:31 Paul similarly blesses God who knows he is not lying: "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, blessed be he forever, knows that I do not lie." Moreover, Paul never elsewhere calls Christ God. Phil 2:6 and 2:9 come close, speaking of him as being "in the form of God" (ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ) and perhaps using κύριος with divine connotations, but in that passage Paul seems to ascribe divine categories to Christ rather than labelling him God.[35] The text-critical variant in Gal 20:20 indicating that Paul directs his faith to both God and Christ, implying their equality, has strong support in P^{46} but is probably secondary. Paul, we should remember, had since his childhood daily confessed that God is one and, as we saw above, earlier in Romans used this conviction as an axiomatic point for arguing that God's righteousness is always through faith (3:30). It would be difficult to reconcile this observation with assuming that he now, in the same letter, intends to say that the person whom he just referred to as human (κατὰ σάρκα) is in fact God;[36] and it would be surprising if he now, in a section moving towards defending God's choice to elect both Jews and Gentiles and concluding with an emphatic defense of righteousness through faith for Jews as well as Gentiles (9:30–33), would blur the strong argumentative force of his monotheistic belief.

The sound analysis of this passage adds a new and significant dimension to this debate and gives support to the interpretation advocated above. What is rarely if ever noticed is the word-play going on with the repeated ὤν. Another look at the Greek text, including also 9:3, indicates the aural impact of the passage:

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[35] The proposed interpretations of this so-called hymn are many. For a history of research, see Gregory P. Fewster, "The Philippians 'Christ Hymn': Trends in Critical Scholarship," *Currents in Biblical Research* 13 (2015), 191–206.

[36] Rom 1:3–4 indicates not that the Messiah κατὰ σάρκα became God at his resurrection but rather that he entered into the sphere of God as his Son. Cf. my "Epistolography."

[3] ηὐχόμην γὰρ ἀνάθεμα εἶναι αὐτὸς ἐγὼ ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ
ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν συγγενγενῶν μου κατὰ σάρκα
[4a] οἵτινές εἰσιν Ἰσραηλῖται
[4b] **ὧν** ἡ υἱοθεσία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ αἱ διαθῆκαι καὶ ἡ νομοθεσία
καὶ ἡ λατρεία καὶ αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι
[5a] **ὧν** οἱ πατέρες καὶ **ἐξ ὧν** ὁ χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα **ὁ ὢν** ἐπὶ
πάντων
[5b] θεὸς εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας ἀμήν.

The proposed translation would be as follows:

[3] For I wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for the sake
of my people according to the flesh,
[4a] which are Israelites,
[4b] **to whom** belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises,
[5a] **to whom** belong the patriarchs, **from whom** comes the Christ
according to the flesh, **he being** over all.
[5b] God be blessed forever. Amen.

To be noticed is that the text sounds as if the performer repeated the relative pronoun ὧν several times from the beginning of 9:4b in order to emphasize the things that have come from the Israelites. Then comes however ὁ ὢν ἐπὶ πάντων, where ὁ ὤν cannot be a relative pronoun although sounding like one. Reading the text aloud, the relative pronoun sounds very similar to the participle of "to be," ὤν, especially when this participle is preceded by the definite article ὁ and its spiritus asper. Instead of using the simpler expression "who is," ὅς ἐστιν, Paul employs the similarities of sound between the relative pronoun ὧν and the participle form of the verb preceded by the definite article, ὁ ὤν. In this way Paul formulates a rhetorically effectful way of pointing to what has come from the Israelites, the Christ according to the flesh. It is most natural to think that the participle refers back to Christ than forward to God.

Adding to this is Näsellqvist's important observations concerning Paul's use of the Greek period (περίοδος) at the oral performance of a

Greek text.[37] Two thing are of importance: the connection between the end and the beginning of a period and the nervous moment just after the speaker had finished the period and before the audience reacted. Both these items are of importance in ancient recommendations for how to perform a period; and both items are found in Rom 9:3–5.

The first has to do with what a period actually is: artistically arranged cola that end with a rounding connecting the end to the beginning. This is the very definition of a period. Pseudo-Demetrius (date uncertain) says that the sophisticated arrangement of the parts of a period "has a certain bend (καμπήν) and focus (συστροφήν) at the end" (*Eloc.* 10). He continues to explain that the name "period" comes from the image of paths traversed "in a circle" (περιωδευμέναις; *Eloc*. 11), implying that the bend and focus at the end of the period is a concentrated reference back to the beginning of the very same period. The clause, so to say, bends back at the end, connects to the beginning and forms a circuit, a περίοδος in the strict sense of this term.

Secondly, there was room for pause, reflection and praise from the audience when the period was finished. Quintilian, when discussing the difficulties of performing good prose, realizes that the ear finds its best opportunity of forming an appropriate judgment when the rush of words comes to a halt and indicates what usually happens after the last sound of the period: "Here the speech sits (*sedes*), here the listener awaits (*expectat*), here all praise breaks out (*declamat*)" (*Inst.* 9.4.62). Quintilian indicates the tense moment of silence after the period is finished and before the audience gives its acclamation.

Romans 9:3–5 gives evidence of both these things. In connection to commenting on the moment of silence, Quintilian has some interesting comments also on the middle of a period, which is somewhat inferior to the end and the beginning, indicating that the performer should avoid placing short syllables together and pay attention to breathing. The repeated sound pattern in Rom 9:4–5 requires structured breathing –

[37] For his application of this on Rom 9:5, see his forthcoming article in *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok*. The proposal goes back on his paper presentation at the Society of Biblical Literature conference in San Antonio, USA, 2016 and at Svenska Exegetiska Dagen 2020, using insights from my forthcoming commentary on Romans 9–16. The following section depends on his paper from 2016 entitled "Sound as an Interpretive Clue in New Testament Exegesis."

ὧν…ὧν…ἐξ ὧν…ὁ ὤν – where each use of the sounding asper indicates a new colon. The first of these cola is long but manageable, especially as the clauses are linked to each other with the repeated καί and like-sounding syllables dividing the colon into two clauses, so that ἡ υἱοθεσία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ αἱ διαθῆκαι aurally parallels ἡ νομοθεσία καὶ ἡ λατρεία καὶ αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι. When the performer finally comes to the all-important final colon ὁ ὢν ἐπὶ πάντων, he refers in accordance with the ancient rules back to Christ in the first colon in 9:3 – notice also the resemblance between κατὰ σάρκα in 9:3 and 9:5 – and establishes the required circular structure of the entire period.

If this is correct, the blessing in 9:5b was never intended to belong to the period but reflects what happened after the period was finished. We need to imagine that the performer made a brief pause after uttering the last word of the period and made room for the listeners to reflect and react. Paul thus composed Rom 9:3–5 in such a way that he provided the performer with specific textual signs that allowed the listeners to give their appropriate response in the form of a blessing, *after* that the period was finished. Rather than being a description of the Christ, the blessing is a joint response to it. The attentive audience was given the clues of interpretation by well-thought aural features and the listeners were invited to react to the performance after the reading of the period.

Conclusion

Listening in the Bible is a rich topic and we have only touched on two significant occurrences, on that of listening as confessional act of obedience in the Gospel of Matthew as well as on that of interpreting sections in Paul's letter to the Romans being read aloud. The first part of this article illustrated how the Jewish confession of the Shemaʿ served to establish the early Christian understanding of Jesus' obedience to his Father as well as the disciples' obedience to Jesus and God. This is evident in the Gospel of Matthew, as we saw, but its emphasis on the one true God seems to have axiomatic status also elsewhere in early Christianity.

At the heart of the emerging Christian movement, we thus find the confessional act of listening, and on this basis the monotheistic Jewish-Christian faith became manifest. It is perhaps no exaggeration to claim that long before Christian dogmas were decisively formulated in order to regulate the theology and life of the Churches, and probably with

roots in the life of Jesus himself, the Jewish idea of listening fostered obedience and laid the foundation of Christian ethics. The difficult and controversial factor is perhaps not the deep roots and the religious sensibility of listening but the way the Shemaʿ already in the first century seems to be transformed, so that Jesus' Jewish obedience to his Father became intertwined with the disciples' Christ-centered obedience to God. Matthew illustrates this Christological tension by relating the act of listening both to God and to Jesus, oscillating narratively between moments where the obedient listening directs itself to God and to Jesus and thus indicating the process of making sense of who Jesus was.

The second part of this article focused on the importance of studying the oral performance and aural reception of Paul's letter to the Romans in order to fully interpret Paul's message. The two examples, based on the awareness of how ancient experts on performance dealt with sound and with the combination of cola into periods, illustrate that attention to the aural impact of texts liberates the interpreter to enter into the sounding-setting of the first audience and fosters sensitivity to both the cumulative aural effects of sounding syllables and words as well as to the aural syntax of structuring the linkage between individual clauses.

No doubt, an increased sensitivity to the aurality of texts has profound interpretive and hermeneutical implications. It indicates that although the clues encoded into the text set limits for the interpretation of these text, they were also flexible enough to allow a certain amount of interpretative variation when the texts were heard again and again. Such sensitivity suggests a perspective on interpretation that imagines the aural impacts of the very same text on different people depending on their social status (e.g. education, reading habits, manuscript availability) and on the performer's skills and material setting (e.g. size and location of the room, performance out-side, light).

We might wish to work more ambitiously towards establishing chronologically successive readings in the interpretation of texts, so that the second and third readings and listening among the first addressees and the continuous readings and listening in reception history are on equal hermeneutical status, without creating the hierarchy where the first authorial encoding or the first decoding of the authorial audience is the decisive one in creating meaning. The hermeneutical awareness among New Testament scholars and others have opened the door to the

scholarly appreciation of the complexity of interpretation and the reception history. We might learn from the small samples of texts in Paul' letter to the Romans that such questions need not lead us back to the endless discussion of authorial intentionality *versus* reader-response and to indefinite fusions of various hermeneutical horizons but rather alert us to specifically structured historical acts of performance and listening as decisive backbones of modern literary theory and theology.