

THE FOURTH GOSPEL
IN FIRST-CENTURY MEDIA CULTURE

Edited by

ANTHONY LE DONNE
TOM THATCHER



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Chapter 1

INTRODUCING MEDIA CULTURE TO JOHANNINE STUDIES: ORALITY, PERFORMANCE AND MEMORY

Anthony Le Donne and Tom Thatcher

This book seeks to introduce Johannine specialists to the potential value of ancient media studies and to illustrate ways in which the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles might be reconsidered from ancient media perspectives. In recent decades, major currents in Johannine scholarship have followed four well-worn channels of research: the Fourth Gospel's historical value (or lack thereof); the sources of the Johannine tradition and possible relationships between that tradition and the Synoptic trajectory; the compositional development of the text, particularly the relationship between the Gospel's composition-history and the history of the Johannine community; and the potential inherent in reading the Gospel as a self-contained narrative whole. While each of these paths has provided unique and valuable insights, all have tended to neglect the media culture in which the Johannine Christians lived and in which Johannine literature was produced. This lacuna is particularly notable for two reasons: first, because scholarship on the Synoptic Gospels has been significantly informed by media issues for at least the past 25 years; secondly, because all four of the major interpretive trends noted above are largely dependent on implicit assumptions about the ways that Johannine Christians remembered Jesus and communicated their ideas about him orally and in writing. The essays in the present volume, both individually and taken collectively, proceed from the assumption that *the Johannine Literature was a product of first-century media culture and, in turn, significantly contributed to early Christian memory and identity*. This book will thus illustrate the interpretive potential of media criticism for understanding the Gospel of John and the Johannine Epistles.

The term 'ancient media culture' is shorthand for several overlapping sets of interests related to the cognitive and communications environment(s) of antiquity. Studies of the Bible's media culture are generally concerned with three sets of interlocking issues: the nature of *ancient oral cultures*; the dynamics of *ancient oral performance*; and the workings of *memory*. As a corollary, the intersection of these three concerns has led to an increasing interest in aurality, particularly in the active dimensions of *hearing oral*

art/texts/traditions performed and in the hermeneutical implications of the relationship between a composer and a live listening audience. A brief overview of the types of concerns carried by each of these three streams will contextualize the more focused essays to follow in this volume.

Oral Culture

The texts of the New Testament emerged from a society that was largely illiterate yet keenly invested in the memorization and rehearsal of significant textual traditions (see Hezser 2001: 496; Thatcher 2006: 37–49). Indeed, in the New Testament period even written texts were oral in nature, as documents were generally written by dictation to an amanuensis and then recited aloud to groups in public readings.¹ This means that ancient Jesus traditions and other early Christian communications were created and re-created in a media culture quite different from that of the modern Western world.² Rather than describing the traditioning process in terms of ‘transmitting’, ‘writing’, ‘revising’ and/or ‘copying’ fixed texts, oral-traditional culture is better characterized as a complex matrix of communicative influences upon multiple trajectories of recollections of the past – recollections of both the actual past and of past discussions/commemorations of those events. These communicative patterns are critical not only for understanding how people in oral cultures communicate, but also for developing adequate models of cognitive processes and identity formation in traditional societies, including those of the ancient Mediterranean world.

Oral historians are primarily interested in how societies remember people, events, myths and other cultural dialectics in the absence of, or alongside, written documentation. Indeed, in most pre-modern and/or largely illiterate societies, orality is the default venue for the passing on of tradition and the creation of collective identity. Moreover, since ‘history proper’ is normally written and disseminated by the educated, the politically dominant and the social elite, oral history often provides a window into the perspectives of the oppressed and the marginalized. Perhaps for this very reason, until very recently literate historians and biblical scholars tended to treat oral history as inferior to formal historiography, emphasizing the perceived unreliability of collective memory and oral traditioning processes. As children of von

1 As Richard Horsley notes, ‘In an environment in which communication was mainly oral, oral forms, techniques, and style carried over in the production of manuscripts’ (2006: x).

2 See Chris Keith’s essay in the present book for a nuanced approach to the interaction between oral and written tradition (cf. Gamble 2000: 646; Parker 1997: 179, 205). But inasmuch as most scholars still operate with a literary model of transmission, it remains helpful to emphasize the important differences between a primarily oral culture and highly literate Western societies.

Ranke (i.e., historical positivism) born into the Gutenberg galaxy, biblical scholars in the modern period have tended to believe that written books are capable of preserving facts in ways that oral histories cannot. Today, however, historians do not automatically grant a higher degree of factuality to written texts, nor do they extol factuality as the highest virtue of historiography. Conversely, there is now a greater recognition of the balance between stability and variability achieved within oral cultures, and of the fact that oral recollections tend to move toward fixed and durable forms as the core of a tradition stabilizes (Bowman and Woolf 1994; Harris 1989; Lord 1968; Ong 1982; Vansina 1985; Watchel 1996). As a result of these trends, recent schools of thought have narrowed the perceived gap between written text and spoken word, and oral history has emerged as a respectable sub-field within university history departments.

While Johannine scholars have largely overlooked their implications, increasing awareness of the dynamics of oral culture has begun to significantly impact studies of the Synoptic problem, the communities behind the biblical texts, historical Jesus research, the rhetorical/compositional structure of the Pauline letters, and the manuscript history of the New Testament. The pioneering works of Birger Gerhardsson (1961) and Werner Kelber (1983) reframed Synoptic studies in terms of contemporary research in orality, making significant strides beyond the overly linear conception of the interfaces between oral and written texts that had limited the earlier work of Dibelius, Bultmann and other form critics.³ Parallel to the continued work of Kelber, a number of recent studies of the Jesus tradition have reconceptualized the object of their inquiry by taking oral culture seriously (see, for example, Byrskog 1994, 2002; Dunn 2003; Foley 1988; Harvey 1998; Mournet 2005). Serious attention to orality has also undermined overly-literary explanations of the Synoptic problem. James Dunn (2003) and Terence Mournet (2005) have argued that the variances in Jesus tradition manifested from Gospel to Gospel show remarkable affinity to the variances that folklorists expect from traditional oral compositions. Rather than viewing the Synoptic problem in terms of the various Evangelists gathering and editing literary sources in a unidirectional way, students of orality suggest a complex of intersecting influences that shift around a stable core of tradition. Serious attention to orality also has the capacity to undermine one of the chief presuppositions of textual criticism: the quest to reconstruct 'the original manuscripts'. If a story has been given life within an oral culture, there simply is no 'original' text to be reconstructed, but rather an ongoing, multi-generational interaction between tellers and audiences with scribes acting as tradents in the traditioning process. In an oral context, a story can be told with varying

3 The groundbreaking work of Joanna Dewey (1989) and Paul Achtemeier (1990) should also be mentioned here.

details according to the occasion of the telling and still be recognized as the 'same' story.

The essays in Part I of this volume explore various interfaces between the Fourth Gospel and its oral media culture. *Jeffrey Brickle* discusses the nature of, and impetus for, letter-writing in the ancient world by focusing on 1 John. Adopting Thatcher's (2005; 2006) thesis that, for the Johannine community, the written word held a symbolic authority that oral communication did not, Brickle contends that 1 John was written to wield a unifying power in the face of a possible church split. Because each faction in the debate had equal access to the Johannine oral tradition (as mediated by the Holy Spirit), 1 John was written to quell attempts to misconstrue the memory upon which Johannine Christians based their collective identity. Brickle also discusses the interplay between oration for writing and writing for oration in the Johannine context. He argues that the Johannine Letters invoked formative memories to confront the Johannine community's present identity crisis.

Tom Thatcher's essay revisits the question of the composition-history of the Fourth Gospel's prologue (John 1.1-18). Thatcher challenges the consensus view that the prologue is a traditional hymn that was contaminated by the interpolation of details about John the Baptist. Oral performers and aural audiences would not think in terms of interruptions of, or interpolations into, an original text; rather, they would have heard alternate performances of familiar material as distinct texts with particular meanings. Further, the specific compositional dynamics of the prologue suggest that the material on the Baptist is not an interpolation; rather, John 1.1-18 is better understood as an interpretive expansion of the traditional saying attributed to John the Baptist at 1.15. Thus, when viewed in the context of its oral media environment, the prologue emerges as a highly unified textual unit that was likely composed from traditional material at the same time as the Gospel narrative that it now introduces.

Finally, *Chris Keith's* essay sheds new light on the issue of Jesus's literacy and the impetus for the textual placement of John 7.53-8.11. While most explain the insertion (or deletion) of the story of the Adulterous Woman in terms of the pericope's ideological content, Keith suggests that this story was added to the Fourth Gospel as a unique witness to Jesus's literacy and, hence, of his academic credentials as a biblical interpreter. Keith further undermines the central presupposition of textual criticism by suggesting that there never was an 'original form' of the Gospel of John. Clearly, the fact that early manuscripts were capable of absorbing this non-Johannine (possibly oral) traditional story suggests that ancient readers had different conceptions of the boundaries of the 'Johannine' tradition and of the physical text of the Fourth Gospel than do many modern scholars. Finally, Keith explores the implications of his discussion by challenging the assumption that written tradition existed in a 'static' mode while oral tradition existed in a 'performance' mode. In his view, even written texts such as the Gospel of John were capable of adapting to the performance needs of their audiences.

Oral Performance

Oral performance criticism emphasizes the cultural prevalence and compositional impact of public recitations and audience responses. Depending on the venue and the relationship between teller and audience, an ancient oral performance could involve demonstrative interaction that substantially impacted the shape of the spoken text. Thus, oral performances can and will vary in content, gesture, metre, volume and tone based on the immediate presence and response of the aural audience. A simple request for clarification, stated verbally or merely in the form of facial expression and body language, might create a long parenthetical digression or clarification of details absent from other tellings but true to the core of the composition. Importantly, while individual tellings or public readings may vary widely, the framework of an oral composition will most often remain intact so that it may be recognized as the 'same' text that has been composed on previous occasions in other settings. Recognition of these dynamics of oral performance – which would be typical of the social contexts in which the New Testament documents were produced – has led ancient media specialists to emphasize the notion of 'multiple originals': every performance context that includes a teller and an audience is a unique social interaction that produces a unique text. In short, the oral performer or orally performing text (a text written to be read aloud to a listening audience) must conform to the expectations, demands, presuppositions, prejudices, attitudes and direct interactions of a live audience. Obviously, this communications environment differs quite significantly from that of modern authors whose readers are never present at the moment of composition. With respect to the Jesus tradition, scholars now imagine varying contexts of performance and varying degrees of audience participation (see Dewey 1992; Gamble 1995; Hearon 2006; Shiner 2003; Upton 2006).

The essays in Part II of this volume explore the implications of oral performance dynamics for the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. *Tom Thatcher's* article provides a comprehensive paradigm for understanding Johannine compositional techniques. Appealing to a wide range of ancient rhetorical theories on the interface between memory and live performance, Thatcher suggests that the Fourth Evangelist utilized a 'memory theatre' model of composition. While ancient texts were composed and performed orally, rhetoricians and storytellers typically used visual memory strategies to organize and recite information. Following this approach, John narrated stories about Jesus through techniques of visualization that shaped both the content and structure of his presentation.

Tom Boomershine's essay describes the Fourth Gospel as an evangelistic tool aimed at the conversion of non-Christian Jews. Taking cues from first-century performance culture, Boomershine suggests that audiences of oral recitations of the Gospel would have slipped naturally into the role of Jesus's dialogue partners during the presentation of his speeches. These dialogue partners include sympathetic characters such as the disciples, Nicodemus and

Peter, but also, and perhaps most often, ‘Jews’ who reject Jesus’s claims. Thus, in public recitations of the text, both Jewish and Christian audiences would have heard Jesus’s words to unbelieving Jewish characters as a direct address to themselves, and would have been encouraged to reflect on the adequacy of their own understanding of Christ. This being the case, Boomershine argues that the Fourth Gospel was written and performed primarily for Jewish audiences who were undecided on Jesus’s identity, and thus at a time before the Johannine community had left the synagogue. Obviously, this approach not only departs from traditional media models that picture the Fourth Evangelist writing silently for private readers, but also significantly challenges the long-standing consensus that the Gospel of John was written for believing Christians and expresses a hostile attitude toward Jewish people.

Antoinette Wire’s essay challenges traditional developmental approaches to the composition of the Fourth Gospel on the basis of oral media dynamics. Her discussion of prophetic speech takes seriously John’s notable emphasis on the memorial work of the Holy Spirit. Wire suggests that John’s famous ‘I am’ sayings are best understood as the product of the prophetic spirit, as Jesus’s traditional words were re-narrated as first-person declarations before live audiences in order to harness the rhetorical impact of Christ’s authoritative presence. This being the case, the problem of the historical value of the Fourth Gospel must be re-envisioned in terms of the evolving reality of the ongoing presence of Jesus in the life of the Johannine community. Wire’s analysis of John 9, a chapter that has functioned as the *crux interpretum* of the Johannine literature for four decades now, illustrates the implications of this compositional model as a case study.

Finally, *Michael Labahn’s* essay argues that the Fourth Gospel portrays the Jewish Scriptures as both a written authority and a speaking character. While the Johannine Jesus uses persuasive speech to claim undisputed authority for himself as an interpreter of the Jewish Bible, the Scriptures themselves would speak directly to the audience when recited in oral performance. Building on these observations, Labahn describes the Gospel’s relationship to Jewish Scripture in terms of the hermeneutical process of ‘oral enactment’, a dynamic model that moves beyond long-standing debates about the precise sources and accuracy of John’s ‘citations’ of the Bible. Viewed in terms of oral performance, the Scriptures that appear in the Fourth Gospel should not be understood as embedded chunks culled from earlier documents, but rather as a dynamic form of divine communication that continues to testify on Jesus’s behalf alongside the voices of other characters that function as ‘witnesses’.

Memory as Medium

Building on the seminal work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1925; 1941), social memory theorists argue that memory is not a passive retrieval of stored information, but rather a fluid and creative process that

conforms the realities of the actual past to the needs of the present. Past and present must be linked simply because memory is formative for a group's collective identity and sense of continuity with earlier generations. This being the case, memory is never perceived outside of social frameworks; rather, it is always spurred and constrained by social contexts (see J. Assmann 1992; 1995; 2000; Connerton 1989; Fentress and Wickham 1992; Hutton 1993; Namer 1987; Nora 1989; Schwartz 1982; 2000; E. Zerubavel 2003; Y. Zerubavel 1995).⁴

Social memory theorists think of 'memory' not as the content of recollections, but rather as a dynamic *dialogue* that is continually reconfigured by the immediate social frameworks in which speech about the past is localized. Because events are inherently subject to multiple interpretations, impressions of the actual past require constant redefinition to remain intelligible and relevant. One of the more significant cross-cultural strategies of redefinition involves narrativization, the process of organizing and structuring recollections in the form of stories with linear sequences. Beginnings, settings, climaxes and conclusions are (often subconsciously) imposed upon memories in order to arrange pertinent details. The more important an event is to a person or a society, the more quickly it will be localized in familiar narrative frameworks that follow archetypal patterns which will be recognizable to most members of the group. As a result, narrative presentations of the past are typically stamped with the values and power relations that drive a group's patterns of socialization and domination. While some theorists have emphasized this point to challenge the historical value of collective memories, most contend that the actual past and earlier forms of commemoration constrain new representations. Further, popular memory and formal historiography serve similar social functions, and both depend on active interpretive frameworks and social constraints to remain intelligible. Ultimately, then, social memory theorists are less concerned with the content of collective memory and its potential historical value than with the ways that specific artifacts of memory (such as the Johannine writings) reflect the structure, values and identity of the groups that produced them.

The essays in Part III of this volume illustrate differing approaches to the interface between memory, tradition and text in the Johannine context. *James Dunn's* study surveys prominent parallels between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, and attempts to explain the tortured relationship between these books in terms of ancient media culture. Extending the conclu-

4 Even when memories are employed in isolation, social frameworks spur and constrain them. As Michael Schudson notes, 'even where memories are located idiosyncratically in individual minds, they remain social and cultural in that (a) they operate through the supra-individual cultural construction of language; (b) they generally come into play in response to social stimulation, rehearsal, or social cues, ... and (c) there are socially structured patterns of recall' (Schudson 1995: 347; see also Thatcher 2006: 54-60).

sions of his magisterial series *Christianity in the Making*, Dunn argues that apparent tensions between John and the Synoptics are actually typical of the variability and stability observable in variant collective memories of Jesus' historical impact. In Dunn's estimation, the Gospel of John lies close to the outer limit of how memories could be creatively altered while still remaining faithful to the core of a common tradition. *Anthony Le Donne's* article attempts to reconceptualize conventional understandings of 'Jesus tradition' by describing the interfaces between history, tradition and text in terms of collective memory dynamics. Le Donne's article takes important strides by emphasizing the relationship between personal memories of Jesus and commemorations of him in texts such as the Fourth Gospel. Using the 'temple saying' in John 2 as a test case, Le Donne shows how Jesus's words could be retained yet reinterpreted when moving through successive group memory frameworks on their way to inclusion in the written text of the Fourth Gospel. *Catrin Williams* explores the Fourth Gospel's strategic appeals to Abraham in terms of combative speech and group interaction. Drawing on a variety of social memory and social identity theories, Williams analyses ways that the Fourth Evangelist selects, contests, appeals to and reconfigures Jewish memories of Abraham in the light of Johannine belief in Jesus. Thus, Abraham is reshaped to serve as a witness to Jesus's role as the exclusive mediator of salvation.

Taken together, the essays in Part III illustrate the multiple facets of social memory studies as applicable to the Fourth Gospel: Dunn examines what Aleida Assmann would call 'communicative' memory (1999: 64), the matrix of oral contexts from which memories emerge in the first two generations of a new group; Williams examines what Assmann calls 'cultural' memory, the reshaping of significant figures and events from the past for purposes of identity construction; Le Donne explores the relationship between commemorative texts like the Fourth Gospel and early and widespread memories of the historical Jesus.

Following these focused case studies, Part IV of this volume features reflective responses from experts on media studies and the Johannine Literature. *Barry Schwartz*, widely recognized as a leading authority on the interfaces between memory, history and popular culture, reflects on the Johannine literature's potential contribution to broader understandings of media culture. *Gail O'Day*, widely respected for her expertise in biblical studies generally and the Johannine literature specifically, reflects on the implications of media studies for future research on the Fourth Gospel and 1, 2 and 3 John. Their willingness to tackle such a vast array of topics outside their own disciplines speaks to the generous characters and intellectual versatility of these respondents. Hopefully, this dialogue will stimulate further fruitful discussion for both disciplines.

Chapter 2

SEEING, HEARING, DECLARING, WRITING: MEDIA DYNAMICS IN THE LETTERS OF JOHN

Jeffrey E. Brickle

More than mere adjuncts to the Fourth Gospel, the Letters of John serve as important documents in their own right. As products of first-century media culture, these discourses reflect decisions to utilize particular media forms in particular ways. Fittingly, the Prologue of 1 John indicates that the reality of ‘that which was from the beginning’ had been apprehended through the senses, then conveyed and received through various media agencies, including both oral (μαρτυροῦμεν, ‘we are bearing witness’; ἀπαγγέλλομεν, ‘we are declaring’) and written (γράφομεν, ‘we are writing’) discourse. From a media perspective, the status of the Letters as written literature can be misleading, for from start to finish – from pre-compositional debate to dramatic performances before audiences – these documents engage a wide variety of communicative forms. This essay explores the interactive elements constitutive of the media world of the Letters, ranging from textuality to orality/aurality, performance and memory, and also offers ways in which these elements might be exploited in an effort to better appreciate the Letters’ media dynamics.

Conceived in a Media Crisis

Patristic evidence suggests that the Letters of John originated in Asia Minor (Brown 1982: 100–3; Trebilco 2008: 241–71). It is conceivable that one of the congregations in Ephesus, where the author of the Letters may have resided, served as a mother church with some jurisdiction over a circle of satellite churches located in the surrounding region (Brown 1982: 32, 101–2; Thatcher 2005b: 419). While the precise situation underlying the Letters is impossible to reconstruct with certainty, formulation or adoption of a preliminary working model is necessary to account for their form and content (Kruse 2000: 1–2).

Raymond Brown’s influential hypothesis (1982: 69–71) posits that within the community interpretations arose that distorted the original Johannine

teachings reflected in the Fourth Gospel, eventually leading to schism. In Brown's view (1982: 86–100), 1 John imitated the Gospel in terms of genre, structure, style and argumentation in an attempt to respond to and correct deviant understandings of the Gospel that denied Jesus's coming in the flesh (1 John 4.1-3). Brown's hypothesis has been criticized at various stages, not least for an exegesis largely dependent on a mirror reading in which Brown surmises the opponents' views on the basis of the author's antithetical statements (Lieu 1991: 5–6; Childs 1985: 482–5).

Whether or not one supports Brown's polemical reconstruction, it would seem clear from an examination of the Letters, especially 1–2 John, that disagreements within the community had arisen over opposing views on Christology and ethics, precipitating a crisis of verbal discourse – a virtual war of words. At some point before the Letters were recorded, sharp debate between the parties ultimately led to rupture, with one side pulling out of the community (1 John 2.18-19). Seeking inroads in which to prey upon vulnerable members still loyal to the 'original' Johannine tradition, these secessionists likely employed persuasive rhetoric in order to reassert influence among their former associates (1 John 2.26). Fittingly, while frequent references to forms of γράφω ('to write') within the Letters attest to their inscribed nature (1 John 1.4, 2.1, etc.), numerous terms scattered throughout also denote verbal interaction (e.g., ἀγγελία/ἀναγγέλλω and ἀπαγγέλλω, 'message'/'to declare'; ἀρνέομαι, 'to deny'; διδαχή/διδάσκω, 'teaching'/'to teach'; λόγος/λαλέω and λέγω, 'word'/'to speak'; μαρτυρία/μαρτυρέω, 'witness'/'to bear witness'; ὁμολογέω, 'to confess'; and ψεύστης/ψεύδος/ψευδοπροφήτης/ψευδομαι, 'liar'/'lie'/'false prophet'/'to lie'). The conflict between the parties had spilled over into writing.

Why Did John Write Letters?

If a modest attempt to establish a tentative, pre-compositional situation behind the Letters suggests that they originated in a media crisis entailing oral speech, what prompted the writing of the Letters? On one level, the answer to this type of question has often been sought as if it was merely an historical issue: *why* did John write letters? (See Thatcher 2006: 1–9). Working at the problem from this angle, scholarship has chiefly been engaged in an effort to undercover the underlying historical purpose(s) for the Letters. Brown (1979), for example, has attempted to respond to the question at length by imaginatively recreating the history of the Johannine Community and demonstrating how the various writings of John may have fitted into this reconstructed account.

I prefer, however, to approach the problem from a media angle by taking up the focused question that Tom Thatcher (2006: 1–9) has recently posed of the Fourth Gospel (Why did John *write* a Gospel?) and apply it to John's Letters (Why did John *write* letters?). Reframing our question slightly,

why did John elect not to continue responding to the crisis at hand solely via an oral medium but choose rather to enlist the aid of another form of technology – writing? We will first consider Thatcher’s approach to the question as it pertains to the writing of John’s Gospel, before applying it to the writing of the Letters.

Basing his approach to the Fourth Gospel largely on modern theories of social memory, especially the seminal work of Maurice Halbwachs – who argued that memory is not a neutral construct but one shaped by and within communities (Thatcher 2005a: 86–8; 2006: xiii–xiv, 56) – as well as the distinctly Johannine understanding of the nature of memory (Thatcher 2005a: 82–5; 2006: 23–36), Thatcher posits an important distinction between the consensus view of writing as archive, as opposed to writing as rhetoric. In the former model, a Gospel functions essentially as a ‘sacred filing cabinet’ used for the deposit and retrieval of ‘raw recollections’ (Thatcher 2006: 23; 2005a: 80–82). Under the latter model, given the Holy Spirit’s critical role in the Johannine memory system as preserver of the content and proper interpretation of tradition, writing was rendered unnecessary for the mechanical storage and recall of memories. Liberated from its role as a surrogate for cognitive memory and bestowed with special prestige by society, writing could thus be exploited for its rhetorical or symbolic value (Thatcher 2005a: 85–6; 2006: 37–49). For Thatcher (2006: 38), then, a history book retained a ‘special aura’ or ‘halo of authority’ absent from mere oral histories.

Placed within the *Sitz im Leben* of a struggle between Johannine loyalists and antichrists over conflicting interpretations of Jesus, Thatcher’s approach envisions a rhetorical employment of writing as a means by which the former group of ‘dogmatists’ could attempt to counteract the counter-memory spawned by the latter group of ‘mystics’. Given the fluid nature of living, with oral memories rendering basic data vulnerable to interpretive reconfiguring, the mystics could quite freely expand and reorder the traditional database (Thatcher 2006: 122). Given that these mystics, as former members of John’s community, based their teachings on the same database and pneumatic memory framework as John did (Thatcher 2006: 74), John could not attack these shared resources directly. Rather, he harnessed the power of a written Gospel, which allowed him to uphold a Spirit-driven memory of Jesus ‘while confining that memory to the boundaries of traditional Christological creeds’ (Thatcher 2006: 102).

We are immediately confronted with two problems when we attempt to consider the purpose behind the Letters of John in light of Thatcher’s hypothesis. First, the author explicitly tells his recipients several times the various reasons why he wrote 1 John (1.4: to cultivate joy; 2.1: to prevent sin; etc.). Focusing exclusively on these passages, though, somewhat sidesteps the specific media-related question at hand: why did John *write* rather than continue to engage solely in *oral* discourse? In 1 John, the concentration of passages dealing with writing may indicate, however, that the recipients, who

perhaps were located in close proximity to John, had been wondering why John wrote when he could have continued to impart his message orally.

Secondly, unlike the Fourth Gospel, the Letters are clearly not historical narratives and thus would not have functioned in precisely the same way. In his study, Thatcher explicitly treats the Gospel, rather than letter, genre from a media angle. While 2 and 3 John reflect nearly model Greco-Roman letters (Lieu 1986: 37–51), the genre of 1 John has remained controversial due to its lack of an epistolary framework (Brown 1982: 86–92). For example, David Aune (1987: 218) classifies 1 John as ‘a deliberative homily’ (cf. Culpepper 1998: 251) whereas Rudolph Schnackenburg (1992: 4; cf. Watson 1993: 118–23) denies that it is a homily.

At any rate, if Thatcher’s overall assumptions about why John *wrote* a Gospel are correct, I wish to propose that John’s Letters, like the Fourth Gospel, were also written as a tactic to exploit the rhetorical power of writing but without the full-fledged authority inherent in a work of history. In this regard, Thatcher’s minority opinion (2006: 64–7) that the Letters may have preceded the Gospel appears compelling, although the specific order of composition is not critical. Oral discourse had failed to quell the secessionist onslaught and the Christians loyal to John remained understandably uneasy about the threat that they posed. In my view, then, the Letters of John, provisionally standing in for John’s pending *Parousia* (2 John 12; 3 John 10, 14), paved the way for the eventual composition of John’s capstone project – his magnum opus – the Fourth Gospel. Under this paradigm, the Letters, on the continuum from oral discourse to written text, represent a midway point before John resorted to a written Gospel as the ultimate countermeasure.

1 John, which comprised a kind of first written response to the secessionist menace, functioned as anti-viral software designed to thwart the antagonists’ attempts to reconfigure the traditional database. 1 John tried to achieve this goal in part by reaffirming who the bona fide system managers were who had authorization to access and interpret the data, and by identifying the illegitimate hackers who sought to expand the information in the database. To draw on another metaphor, 1 John acted as the physician’s initial attempt to treat the patient by radiating the spreading cancer.

On the other hand, 2 John – a parenthetic letter (Watson 1989a: 107–8) – was likely sent to an outlying house church in an effort to instruct the recipients on how to brace themselves for the imminent secessionist invasion. While it is not entirely clear whether 2 John was sent in lieu of John’s physical presence (I consider this issue further below) – and hence as a stopgap to substitute for his inability to instruct them orally – we can surmise that as a written document 2 John also presented a rhetorically powerful statement. It may be that the ‘media crisis’ that preceded the writing of 1 John had yet to reach the setting of the ‘elect lady’ and that 2 John is this house church’s first notice of and exposure to John’s oral debate with the secessionists. It is possible that the process of responding to the immediate situation at hand with 1 John prompted the author to send out 2 John as well.

As for 3 John (an epideictic letter; Watson 1989b: 484–5), nowhere is the main antagonist, Diotrephes, explicitly identified as a secessionist or the problem of false teachers ever mentioned (Thomas 1995: 70; Lieu 2008: 12–14; contra Thatcher 2006: 92, 99, 122). It is thus not entirely clear whether Diotrephes was, to use Thatcher’s terms, a ‘dogmatist’ who was essentially pro-traditionalist or a ‘mystic’ who sided with the secessionists. 3 John 9–11 indicates that Diotrephes’ loyalty towards the author was in serious question and so we might refer to him as a ‘counter-dogmatist’ or ‘alternative-dogmatist’ for refusing to cooperate with the authorized system manager (John) and his ‘support reps’, such as Demetrius (3 John 12). Evidently, verbal discourse preceded the composition and sending of this letter, for John had heard of and rejoiced over reports of Gaius’ stand for truth (3 John 3–4) and hospitality (3 John 5–6), as well as favourable testimonies concerning Demetrius (3 John 12). These were networks John certainly hoped to reinforce. On the other hand, according to 3 John 10 he learned of Diotrephes’ abusive verbiage that had been directed at him (λόγοις πονηροῖς φλυαρῶν ἡμᾶς, ‘slandering us with wicked words’) and he countered by a written rhetorical threat of a personal confrontation (ἐὰν ἔλθω, ὑπομνήσω αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα ἃ ποιεῖ, ‘if I come, I will recall his deeds which he is doing’).

Before moving on, two specific passages that relate directly to media concerns should be considered. At the close of the two shorter letters (2 John 12; 3 John 13–14), John registered his preference to engage his recipients through direct oral communication (στόμα πρὸς στόμα λαλῆσαι, ‘to speak [literally] mouth to mouth’) – at least in the handling of the situations addressed by these letters. It appears, then, at least on the surface, John *reluctantly* settled on the alternative to speaking: pen, ink and paper. Brown (1979: 693–95, 749), however, whose interpretation is open to debate, dismisses the face value of John’s expressed wish to personally visit his recipients as an artificial, conventional way to bring these documents to a close. Significantly, Margaret Mitchell (1992) has argued that Paul employed writing and envoys not merely as substitutes for his personal presence, but in some cases as preferred, more effective means to deal with problems in the churches. If the latter principle applies to John’s letters, the power of writing and sending letters was harnessed as the favoured method *under the circumstances* to represent John’s presence, since speech was normally the favoured method for conveying teaching (Malherbe 1986: 68). Whether or not John routinely preferred oral communication over writing, as many ancients did (Witherington 2007), he elected to respond to the issues at hand via writing.

While Thatcher’s overall approach to the purpose underlying the Fourth Gospel’s writing is intriguing, well-argued and quite helpful, I find one aspect problematic: his insistence that since most of the first-century population was illiterate (Thatcher rightly cites William Harris’ 1989 landmark study), those unable to read would have had little knowledge of the contents of this

document (Thatcher 2006: 39–43, 158–9; 2005a: 96–7). Thatcher goes as far as stating that ‘most people in John’s culture could not read, a fact that would make it *impossible for them even to discuss the actual contents of John’s Gospel*, much less to challenge its claims’ (2006: 153; emphasis is mine).

It is almost certain, however, that many, even most, illiterate persons would have had access to texts, not in the same manner as a modern reader, but through the surrogacy of a skilled reader-performer – the lector – a role I will discuss in more detail below. This fact would have rendered the lack of literacy largely a non-issue. Far more than venerated artifacts accessible only to a privileged few trained to read them, texts maintained ongoing lives among communities through the agency of lectorial performance (Gamble 1995: 204–5). During such performances, texts were highly visible since they were often read from directly (as in a first-century synagogue: Luke 4.16–20) or held in the lector’s left hand when recited from memory (Shiner 2003: 18; Shiell 2004: 40–1, 48–9). Particularly within the intimate context of a Christian house church, the lector may have been immediately accessible to the audience to explain issues arising from the text’s content (Richards 2004: 202). The likelihood exists that through exposure to repeated performances of a text, an illiterate person could have become familiar enough with a text to have memorized it. To his credit, Thatcher (2005a: 81) is aware of ancient oral performances, but in my estimation fails to adequately factor this aspect of first-century media culture into his overall analysis (see Kelber 1997: xxi–xxiv, who addresses this shortcoming in his own, previous scholarship).

How Did John Write Letters?

From a media angle, how did John compose these letters? The primary method of composition in antiquity was by dictation to a scribe (Achtemeier 1990: 12–15; Gamble 1995: 204; Harvey 1998: xv), although some authors wrote in their own hand. Even in the latter case, authors tended to dictate as they wrote (Gamble 1995: 204). People who were illiterate required the services of a scribe, and even the highly literate generally preferred to relinquish such duties to a scribe, who was often a slave (Keener 1993: 449; Campbell 2001: 33). The employment of a scribe or amanuensis other than the author is uncertain in the case of John’s letters, as none is formally credited (cf. Romans 16.22; 1 Peter 5.12). Furthermore, the single occurrence in 1 John 1.4 of the first person plural for the act of writing (γράφομεν, ‘we are writing’) does not imply the presence of a secretary or joint authorship, but indicates an appeal to testimony beyond that of the author alone (Brown 1982: 172; Painter 2002: 137–8; contra Bauckham 2006: 370–5).

John probably worked through the substance and structure of his letters in his own memory before dictating them to a scribe (Horsley 2005: 61; Shiner

2006: 153–4). The dictated oral texts may have been captured initially in a form of shorthand Greek (Richards 2004: 67–74) and written on tablets, which served as rough drafts (Richards 2004: 55–7). The texts were likely reworked and at some point in the process converted to *scriptio continua* (a writing convention devoid of space between words, paragraph divisions and punctuation), perhaps when finally committed to parchment or papyrus (Richards 2004: 48–9).

The fact that John wrote letters – letters which may have undergone revisions before being sent – does not eradicate their oral nature, however, for the overall process suggests that from birth by dictation to subsequent delivery before an audience these letters retained a spoken essence. As Harry Gamble (1995: 204) affirms, ‘in the composition of a text the oral was converted to the written’ and subsequently ‘in reading aloud the written was converted into the oral’. Given a text’s method of production and later functioning, writing served in large measure as a script to preserve an oral event for later oral re-enactment (Stanford 1967: 3; Shiner 2003: 14; Witherington 2007: 28). Thus, textuality functioned first ‘as a representation of speech’ (Shiner 2009: 49) or ‘the symbol for the spoken word’ (Lenz 1989: 4), and then ‘as an aid to oral presentation’ (Dewey 1994: 45). John Foley (2005: 233) has well pointed out that ‘at its very best a textual reproduction – with the palpable reality of the performance flattened onto a page and reduced to an artifact – is a script for reperformance, a libretto to be enacted and reenacted, a prompt for an emergent reality’.

A Multi-Media Event

The practice of silently scanning texts has largely dominated the landscape of modern, Western reading. Paul Saenger (1997) argues that the advent of silent reading in the late Middle Ages corresponded roughly with the introduction of word separation by Irish scribes during the seventh and eighth centuries, although the technology did not arrive on the European continent until the late tenth century. Although ancient reading was commonly conducted aloud (Balogh 1926; Hendrickson 1929–30; Graham 1987: 30–5; Achtemeier 1990: 15–17; Gamble 1995: 203–5; Winger 2003), evidence suggests (contra Saenger) that silent reading occurred more frequently in antiquity than has often been maintained (Clark 1930–1; Slusser 1992; Gilliard 1993; Gavrilov 1997; Burnyeat 1997; Johnson 2001; Shiner 2003: 14). Evidence for the existence of silent reading in the ancient world does not, however, eradicate the necessarily dominant role played by audible reading in service to a mostly illiterate public, and it seems that even the literate aristocracy generally preferred to be read aloud to by their household servants. Furthermore, even silent reading likely involved the phenomenon of *parole intérieure*, the sounding out of the words in the reader’s mind (Hendrickson 1929–30: 194).

Reading was typically carried out through the agency of a skilled lector (Starr 1991; Shiell 2004: 104–7), who in essence ‘became the mouthpiece to allow an audience to “read” a text for themselves’ (Shiell 2004: 4). The lector stood in for, and hence represented, the voice and persona of the author. In some cases the scribe, the envoy and the lector were the same individual. The lector attempted to re-enact the original (compositional or dictated) performance of the text, bringing the inscribed words to life for the audience through gesticulations, facial expressions and vocal inflections (Shiell 2004: 201). As Richard Ward (1994: 95) has suggested, ‘oral performance is a means of transforming silent texts into sounds and movement through the mediums of speech and gesture’.

The oral, performative nature of ancient reading, therefore, shows that we are dealing with texts that are inherently multi-dimensional. As 1 John, for instance, was first read or recited aloud to its recipients, its text was experienced aurally and visually by means of the voice, body and character of the lector, through the ears and eyes of the audience. In addition, the total atmosphere, including the make-up and emotional disposition(s) of the gathered audience as well as the setting’s backdrop of sights, sounds and smells, rendered the ancient reading experience a multi-media event. As Holly Hearon (2006: 11) has observed, texts ‘must be understood in terms of the interaction between a performer and an audience and the tangled web of discourse and experience that binds them together in a particular place and time’.

Could it be that by silently scanning John’s letters, we have missed important dynamics of the ancient reading experience that the audiences would have taken for granted? In much the same way that conventional wisdom has perpetuated the myth that Greco-Roman statues were ‘plain old white’ when in fact they were brightly painted (Reed 2007: 34), many modern readers, silently beholding the Letters of John as bare, cold sculptures of stone, have failed to fully appreciate their rich, living tapestry of sounds and colours. We will now consider in more detail these various aspects of the ancient media experience of oral reading.

Can You Hear the Text?

As we have discussed, one dimension of the multi-media reality of ancient reading entails the imposing presence of sound. Sound is extremely important to biblical interpretation, because ‘thinking about the Bible as an oral document leads to a different set of questions that are acoustemological rather than epistemological’ (Webb 2004: 199). Regrettably, the oral nature of the ancient world has largely been neglected by contemporary biblical research (Kelber 2002: 59). David Rhoads, in a pun derived from the title of a classic monograph by Hans Frei, bemoans ‘the eclipse of biblical orality’. Harry Gamble (1995: 204) and Rosalind Thomas (1992: 117–23)

recommend that if we are to experience texts as they were in antiquity, we must read them aloud, since ancient authors composed for the ear. Whitney Shiner (2003: 16) concurs, noting that ‘as a result of the dictation process, the author composes with an awareness of the aural effect, and writers often ‘wrote’ by speaking in a manner that would approximate the intended oral delivery’.

During the performance of an ancient text, a variety of sound patterns in turn assaulted and provoked, soothed and delighted audiences. William Stanford (1943; 1967: 51–6) describes the differing euphonic impact of various letters of the Greek alphabet as assessed by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *On Literary Composition*. Some letters or letter combinations were considered harsh, others pleasant. Composers sought to employ the right blend of phonic ingredients to achieve the desired aesthetic effect. In a composition some correlation may have existed between the perceived pleasantness and roughness of the discourse or scene being depicted, and the relative smoothness or harshness of the sound patterning of the corresponding lines (Packard 1974). A preliminary analysis conducted by the author of this essay utilizing David Packard’s harshness formula shows a significantly higher harshness factor for 1 John 2.18, in which John addresses the unpleasant departure of the secessionists, as opposed to the opening verse of the letter, designed to immediately gain the recipient’s receptivity.

Hearers interpreted and reacted to texts as they were read aloud, and were largely guided through this process by their perception of unfolding sound patterns. Thus, in the absence of visual markers, an array of auditory signals helped to facilitate movement and structure (Achtmeier 1990: 17–19; Dewey 1992), a phenomenon Van Dyke Parunak (1981) refers to as ‘oral typesetting’. Such signals often crossed, resulting in a ‘plethora of backward and forward echoes’ (Dewey 1989: 29; cf. Malbon 1993). In other words, complex overlapping or interlacing acoustic patterns together knit ‘an interwoven tapestry’ (Dewey 1991).

Not all scholars agree as to what precisely constitutes an aural pattern, or how to analyse such a pattern. Bernard Scott and Margaret Lee (formerly Margaret Dean), however, have carried out valuable research in the area of orality/aurality, being among the first scholars to pioneer an actual methodology of aural analysis (Scott and Dean 1993; Dean 1996), which they refer to as ‘sound mapping’. In her doctoral dissertation (Lee 2005: 127), Lee contends that sound analysis must be carried out before more traditional forms of exegesis. She discusses the complex interplay in Hellenistic Greek writings of aural repetition and variation at the level of phonemes and syllables, cola and periods, and applies these dynamics to the Sermon on the Mount. I will draw in part from Scott and Lee’s insights in my brief analysis that follows below.

Although scholars have considered the role of orality/aurality in a variety of New Testament writings, including the Gospels and Acts (e.g., Bartholomew

1987; Dewey 1989; 1991; 1992; 2001; Bryan 1993; Kelber 1997; Knowles 2004; Borgman 2006; Gilfillan Upton 2006), the Pauline Letters (Kelber 1997; Winger 1997; Harvey 1998; Davis 1999), and the Apocalypse (Barr 1986), relatively little interest has been directed to the aural nature of the Letters of John. While some have noticed that 1 John exhibits aural characteristics (e.g., Perkins 1979; Neufeld 1994), Russ Dudley (2003a: 236) is one of the first scholars to draw attention to these elements, noting that 1 John ‘furnishes a specific case of a biblical document consciously written to be read aloud to an audience – a document of “oral literature” full of identifiable oral and auditory features’. He notes (2003a) the presence of an array of auditory features, such as aphorisms, balanced structures (including comparisons, parallelisms, chiasmic structures and binary oppositions), verbal jingles, repeated use of the coordinating conjunction *καί* (‘and’), repetition, and fixed language patterns.

Dudley extends his research on the auditory features of 1 John by investigating the role of sound ingrained in the document’s macrostructure. Determining 1 John’s overarching organization has long been considered problematic. For example, Raymond Brown (1982: 117–268) claims that it has ‘no discernibly regular pattern’, David Rensberger (2006: 279) likewise asserts that it ‘does not have a clear outline or pattern of development’, and Gary Burge (1997: 597) maintains that ‘discovering a recognizable pattern or structure of thought ... has proven impossible’. Alan Brooke (1912: xxxii) suggests that the quest be relinquished altogether.

Dudley insists, however, that scholars have pursued the issue in entirely the wrong way, for the macrostructure of 1 John must be sought through an auditory rather than literary paradigm: ‘Analyzing 1 John by literary criteria yields confusing results at best, but analyzing it by oral and auditory criteria frees the letter to function by its native rules.’ Dudley maintains that 1 John is framed by ‘topical cycles of auditory material’, comprising the topics of Christology and theology, holy living and brotherly love. The topics are not organized by ‘linear logic, but in spirals of interwoven material, whose seams are stitched together by oral and auditory cues that John could expect his hearers to pick up’. Dudley’s observations are clearly important, yet could benefit from further development.

While this is not the place to offer a full-blown analysis of the dynamics involved in 1 John’s auditory matrix, I do wish to comment on the role the Prologue’s sounds play in the initial unfolding of John’s message. The following brief analysis represents some highlights on aural patterning from two of my presented papers and my doctoral dissertation entitled ‘Aural Design and Coherence in the Prologue of First John’. The Prologue, consisting of a complex passage that has earned the possible distinction of being ‘the most complicated Greek in the Johannine corpus’ (Brown 1982: 152), serves as the piece’s auditory prelude or foyer, providing a palette of sound colours for the artist’s brush as he moves on to paint the composition’s body and conclusion.

The opening of the Prologue with its ‘initial aural formula’ (see Scott and Dean 1993: 679 and 708), ὃ ἦν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς (‘That which was from the beginning’), begins to establish a principal sound pattern, elements of which recur throughout the Prologue and beyond. Examples of these recurring ‘sound bites’ include the relative pronoun ὃ and the elided preposition ἀπ’, the latter of which forms an alliteration with some of the words which immediately follow (ἀρχῆς ... ἀκηκόαμεν, ‘beginning ... we have heard’) and anticipates the prefixed preposition of the compound first main verb (ἀπαγγέλλομεν, ‘we are declaring’) in v. 3. The phrase ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς (‘from the beginning’) arguably plays a key role in the letter (2.7, 13, 14, 24; 3.8, 11; cf. 2 John 5, 6).

The overall syntactical organization of the Prologue, which may be mapped out as a simple ABC/A'B'C' configuration, is supported and enhanced by the strategic use of sound patterning. This patterning serves to mark the Prologue’s aural foreground and background as well as drive its progressive, unfolding discourse forward, building auditory suspense. Each of the two main sections consists of a direct object (A/A'), main verb (B/B'), and purpose clause (C/C'). Section 1 (vv. 1-3) features an extended, amplified direct object and purpose clause, each incorporating a parenthetical digression showcasing the themes of ζωή (‘life’) and κοινωνία (‘fellowship’), respectively. Section 2 (v. 4), on the other hand, is considerably abridged, with its abbreviated length in comparison to that of Section 1 reflective of Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ concern for variety in beautiful composition (Caragounis 2006: 411). Three key sound patterns, ὃ (‘which’), καί (‘and’), and the vowel-μεν verbal termination (‘we’), occur in the Prologue, often in conjunction with one another: ὃ ... vowel-μεν and καί ... vowel-μεν.

Margaret Lee (Dean 1998: 86) notes that sound not only supports a text’s rhetorical structure, but also helps lend it its persuasive force. Given the brief analysis above, how does 1 John’s overall aural patterning function? How does its form relate to its content? In short, 1 John’s aural patterning agrees with its primary message, even though sound and semantics can intentionally be set at odds (Lee 2005: 109–12). Through the integration of sound patterning with syntactical structure, the author highlights the centrality of the direct object (summarized as ὃ), and in part by the repeated soundings of the vowel-μεν pattern (signifying ‘we’) establishes the authority and ethos that he and his associates share, closely linking the direct object with the witnesses/transmitters of the tradition (ὃ ... vowel-μεν). Significantly, little is said specifically in the Prologue concerning the profile of the recipients (‘you’), other than that the tradition had been transmitted to them. Their anticipated κοινωνία ‘with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ’ (1.3) was contingent upon (implied by ἵνα, ‘in order that’) fellowship with the tradition bearers, with a more detailed elucidation of the requirements for κοινωνία reserved for the body of the letter (e.g., 1.6-7).

Unfortunately, the aural and literary qualities of 1 John have not always been appreciated. The grammatical integrity and coherence of the Prologue,

for example, have often been denigrated, as the following appraisals (based primarily on a silent reading paradigm) suggest: a 'grammatical tangle' (Dodd 1946: 3); 'grammatical impossibilities' and 'undeniable crudity of expression' (Houlden 1973: 45); a 'morass', 'scramble' and 'befuddling array of language' with its 'Greek border[ing] on incongruence' (Kysar 1986: 30, 34); 'confused' (Strecker 1996: 8); 'nearly impossible grammar' (Rensberger 1997: 45); and 'nearly impenetrable' to the modern reader (Black 1998: 382).

Admittedly, the Prologue presents difficulties, including its extended length and parenthetical interruptions, postponement of its main verb, and alternation of its verb tenses (Brown 1982: 153), not to mention a host of ambiguities (Anderson 1992: 8–19). The problems surrounding the Prologue's complexity are not insurmountable, however, and its design becomes more evident when it is read aloud as it was intended. I would even suggest that some of the alleged difficulties may have actually contributed to the aural effect John desired. In short, we must learn to read 1 John, along with all ancient literature, 'with our ears as well as our eyes' (Yaghjian 1996: 207).

Can You See the Text?

While the theme of the dramatic nature of the Johannine Writings is not new (Brant 2004; Smalley 2005), relatively few studies have acknowledged this aspect of the Letters of John. Ironically, however, the opening words of 1 John, reflecting 'the abundant sensuality of the apostolic encounter with the Word', show that its dynamic sensory language is germane to the theatre arts (M. Harris 1990: 2). While many ancients were unable to visually decipher a written text for themselves, a text achieved visible form through its delivery. In other words, audiences 'read' the lector's performance. Our modern, literate society, by contrast, is awash with visible texts, for 'we live in a world of visible words' (Small 1997: 3).

Hand gestures were an important component of oral delivery. As an 'inseparable accompaniment of any spoken language' (K. Thomas 1991: 6), gestures functioned as a sort of second text. Thus, a Roman orator while speaking was in effect 'simultaneously communicating in two languages, one verbal and one nonverbal' (Aldrete 1999: 6). The study of gesticulation, itself an important element of ancient delivery and hence of rhetorical training (Graf 1992: 37), is critical to any consideration of ancient media culture. In many contexts, body language is more important than the words that are spoken (K. Thomas 1991: 6). While certain universal gestures have retained the same general meaning over time and across cultures, body language tends to evolve. If we are to adequately interpret communication from the past, we must become students of gestural delivery (K. Thomas 1991: 10).

Through a consideration of discussions in rhetorical handbooks and references in other literary sources as well as depictions of oratory in paintings, sculptures, coins, and the like, scholars have attempted to reconstruct ancient gesturing and its accompanying postures (Shiell 2004: 34–7). Gregory Aldrete (1999: 3–43), for example, has assembled a repertoire, illustrated with helpful sketches, of ancient Roman oratory gestures and body motions. We do not have space in this essay to adequately explore this approach further, but future studies could attempt to plot out or ‘gesture map’ an imaginative performance matrix for the Letters of John. By correlating the texts of the letters with known gesturing language, we might come closer to resurrecting their ancient performances.

Such a performance matrix could also furnish clues which might help solve grammatical and semantic ambiguities in the Letters of John. It is likely that a number of puzzling and awkward features inherent in the text of 1 John might be resolved if we could have been present at one of its ancient presentations and ‘read’ the lector’s body language. Interestingly, Alan Boegehold (1999: 8) notes that many instances of conundrums in ancient Greek texts, including baffling word meanings, ellipses, or irregular constructions, are best explained not through textual emendation but by the addition of an expected nod or hand gesture. The application of gesture to thorny passages can inform both semantics and grammar, since gesture can ‘complete the sense where canonical philology falls short’ and serve ‘as a way of undoing certain knots grammar does not untie’ (Boegehold 1999: 6, 10). For instance, the dangling relative clause ὃ ἦν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς (‘That which was from the beginning’) which begins 1 John lacks a grammatical antecedent (Baugh 1999: 2), yet its original oral reading might have been accompanied by a clarifying gesture.

Another element that can augment our understanding of the Letters of John is to consider the symbolic value of the surroundings within which the original performances were held. Aldrete (1999: 18–19) points out that performance environments, such as buildings or spaces, served as rich sources for symbols that the orator could refer to in verbal or non-verbal ways (1999: 24). He notes (1999: xix) that ‘because of the richly symbolic landscape in which most speeches were delivered, by using pointing motions an orator could draw on this environment to enhance or supplement his words’. Along similar lines, Barbara Burrell’s recent study (2009) suggests powerful ways in which an analysis attuned to environmental factors, such as the arrangement of buildings, streets, and décor encircling inscriptions, can impact our understanding of ancient reading dynamics.

In the case of the Letters of John, private residences, likely owned by wealthy members of the respective congregations, probably functioned as the original ‘theatres’ in which lectorial performances were held. As the lectors recited, they may have gestured periodically towards their surroundings, including structures or objects in the homes, to add emphasis or to offer clarification. Framework, such as doorways, floors, columns, windows and

ceilings, as well as furniture and décor, including tables, chairs, paintings, mosaics and sculptures, could have served as ready object lessons. In this regard, a close study of the design and furnishings of the terrace houses excavated in Ephesus (Trebilco 2008: 34, n. 151; Murphy-O'Connor 2008: 192–7) could provide archaeological models for the type of settings the letters were read in, keeping in mind that overtly pagan objects, such as representations of mythological figures, may have been removed by Christians from their gathering places. Examples of the symbolic exploitation of a performance site might include 1 John 5.21, where the lector, in cautioning the audience to avoid idols, may have gestured towards a statue located outside (for two differing interpretations of idols in this passage, see Griffith 2002: 206 and Bultmann 1973: 90–1), or 2 John 10, in which the lector may have pointed to the door of the house where the audience was gathered as he admonished them not to receive any false teachers into their house church.

Can You Remember the Text?

Memory, a technique of ancient rhetoric that enabled orators to recall and deliver lengthy speeches (Yates 1966: 2), was highly revered in antiquity (Byrskog 2002: 160–1), and even integrated into the educational system (Carruthers 2008: 8). The memory served as the ‘principal faculty for intellectual and moral formation’ (Kirk 2008: 219) and as the ‘main textual reservoir’ of ancient ‘literary life’ (Jaffee 2001: 18). Like many other ancient compositions, the Letters of John were written to be memorable, a trait beneficial to both speaker and hearer (Dewey 2001: 241).

It is probable that the original lectors knew well the text of John’s Letters before they read them aloud (see Carr 2005: 4), and that they likely recited them by heart (Horsley 2005: 61). This left their eyes and hands unencumbered, thus freeing them to gesticulate (Shiner 2003: 103–4) and make solid eye-contact with the audience. A memorable compositional design and style aided a lector’s efforts to commit the text to memory, helped render the reading event itself an unforgettable occasion for the audience, and supported the audience’s long-term recall of the text’s structure and wording. It was especially critical that the lector could remember a document’s structure, ‘since an ancient rhetor who lost control of the structure of his argument proved himself to be a second-rate rhetor, thereby undermining the effectiveness of his own argument’ (Longenecker 2005: 6).

The framework of John’s Letters facilitated their memorization (J. Thomas 1998: 380). Shiner (2003: 114–17) has suggested that relatively short sections predicated on triplet episodes and the use of chiasms contribute to the memorable nature of Mark’s Gospel. John’s penchant in his letters for moderately brief segments, typically structured internally by groupings of

three (e.g., 1 John 2.12-14; 15-17), as well as the employment of triplet word repetitions, likewise indicate techniques that support the memory. Through a compositional strategy that integrated key themes, strong imagery and the persuasive use of sound – the prime ingredients for effectively transmitting traditions in an oral culture (Rubin 1995) – John rendered his letters memorable.

Various mnemonic techniques were employed among Greeks and Romans (Small 1997: 81–116), some of which have parallels with the visual, tactile and aural methods employed by modern musicians (Marvuglio 2007). We cannot be certain what approach(es) the Johannine lectors used to memorize the Letters. Shiner (2006: 152–3) notes that speeches were committed to memory either word-for-word or in essence. One could memorize a written speech through repeated oral readings or resort to an artificial memory technique involving, for example, image association. With this latter method, images that corresponded to portions of the text were mentally placed into various locations in a background, such as a building or landscape, which had been committed to memory beforehand. Then the person memorizing the speech would mentally revisit the locations in order, retrieving the associated images (Shiner 2006: 153).

Given their brevity as well as the gravity of the matters they addressed, as stated above the Letters of John were likely memorized verbatim. The lectors may have relied on image association in this process. This method was utilized to memorize each word of a speech, or merely the outline (Shiner 2006: 153). Various key terms, representative of sections in 1 John, seem to inherently conjure up strong images (e.g. κόσμος, ‘world’, for the section 2.15-17; αντίχριστος, ‘antichrist’, for 2.18-27), and may have worked particularly well for remembering the text’s structure. In the Prologue of 1 John, anatomical associations are implicitly or explicitly made by the text (e.g., the ear for ἀκηκόαμεν, ‘we have heard’; eyes for ἐωράκαμεν, ‘we have seen’ and ἐθεασάμεθα, ‘we have beheld’; and hands for ἐψηλάφησαν, ‘they have handled’). By imaging human anatomy while memorizing this passage, the lector would have encountered an intrinsic mnemonic aid that naturally facilitated properly-ordered recall.

Memory plays an important role in the Letters of John not only as an aesthetic component, aiding in its composition, delivery and subsequent recall, but as an integral part of John’s message itself. Drawing on the past, John calls his recipients (1 John 1.1-3) to fellowship (κοινωνία) with him and his associates through participation in the experience of the ‘word of life’ (τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς), whose manifestation was firmly anchored in John’s memory. John bears witness (μαρτυροῦμεν) to his remembrances of that ‘from the beginning’ (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς), an important phrase which also appears in Luke’s Prologue and suggests eyewitness presence at the events themselves (Bauckham 2006: 119; cf. Dunn 2003: 178).

Later in the letter, as his recipients heard John referring to *their* original reception of the message ‘from the beginning’ (1 John 2.7, 24; 3.11; cf. 2

John 6), these references would have triggered recollections of their past experience. John was urging them to cultivate their remembered past (1 John 2.24) and relate it to the present crisis, knowing that the inspiration behind the secessionists' discourse and behaviour stemmed ultimately from an altogether different beginning (1 John 3.8) than that which John was remembering.

Have You Responded to the Letters?

In recent decades, reader-response criticism has heightened awareness of the key role that audiences play in the communicative process (Tompkins 1980). The Greco-Roman audience was, of course, no less a vital player in the ancient reading process. Far from fulfilling a passive role, those to whom the Letters of John were sent served as active participants in the reading event.

It is highly improbable that the Letters of John were originally recited in a monotone voice, with no show of emotion on the part of the lectors or the recipients. Had they been, their effectiveness would be in doubt, for as Shiner (2003: 57) has observed, 'The success of verbal art was often judged by the way it affected the emotions of the listeners.' Rather, John's Letters were likely spoken in a highly animated fashion. Even though philosophical groups such as the Stoics sought to suppress the so-called passions (though see Sorabji 2000), studies attest to a wide range of emotional expression in ancient culture (Fortenbaugh 2002; Knuuttila 2004; Konstan 2006). Pathos was an integral component of ancient rhetorical theory (Kennedy 1984: 15; Welborn 2001) and emotional expression was considered part and parcel of both delivery and audience response.

As noted above in the section, 'Can You See the Text?', an array of gestures was available to the ancient lector and these were exploited to elicit specific emotional responses from audiences. As Aldrete (1999: 6) has observed, 'certain gestures were associated with various emotions so that as an orator spoke, his body offered a separate and continuous commentary on what emotions the words were intended to provoke'. These gestures could portray emotions such as 'surprise, indignation, entreaty, anger, adoration, reproach, grief, insistence or emphasis, and aversion' (Shiell 2004: 62). Fittingly, references to emotions or passions like these appear fairly frequently in the Letters of John (e.g., forms of ἀγάπη/ἀγαπάω/ἀγαπητός, 'love'/'to love'/'beloved'; μισέω, 'to hate'; ἐπιθυμία, 'lust'; φόβος/φοβέω, 'fear'/'to fear', and χαρά/χαίρω, 'joy'/'to rejoice').

Perhaps one of the reasons that 1 John follows no patently logical structure is that its rhetoric was not aimed chiefly at the intellect but towards the heart. Arguably, the primary function of all of John's letters was to procure responses from the audiences by appealing to their emotions. Any attempt at accurately reconstructing these responses rests largely, of course, on imaginative conjecture.

One document that stems from the same general milieu and era, and addresses a Hellenistic audience not unlike the recipients of John's letters, is the Acts of the Apostles. Numerous speeches and a few embedded letters are included in Acts. In several cases the audience's reaction to a declamation is described (e.g., Acts 2.37, 'pieced in the heart'; 4.2, 'being disturbed'). Perhaps most important for our purpose is the account of the Jerusalem Council, which attempted to settle a heated dispute between the apostles and a Judaizing faction over the ongoing role of the law in relation to Gentile converts to Christianity (15.1-21). The meeting resulted in a letter being dispatched to Syria and Cilicia (15:22-30) in which the recipients who heard it read aloud (15.31) 'rejoiced for the encouragement' (ἐχάρησαν ἐπὶ τῇ παρακλήσει) and were also edified through the prophetic ministry of Judas and Silas (Acts 15.32).

While clearly the situations described in Acts 15 and 1 John are markedly different in many ways, Luke's account of the response to the reading of the letter stemming from the Jerusalem Council may offer some indication of how the recipients of 1 John may have reacted. In both situations, it is evident that debate had been intense and tensions were running high. Like those who had encountered the adamant claims of the Judaizers (Acts 15.1, 5), John's constituents probably felt intimidated, troubled and confused in their confrontations with the secessionists (Marshall 1997: 4).

While not denying that a dire threat remained, John attempted to defuse the volatile situation by offering a degree of resolution through a sense of hope (1 John 3.3), joy (1.4), victory (4.4; 5.4), and guidance (4.1-3), and attempting to achieve solidarity with his recipients (1.3). The ending of 1 John (5.13-21), with its emphasis on confidence (παρρησία) in prayer and knowledge (Smalley 1984: 293), reflected in a cadence of first-person plural verbs of knowing (οἶδαμεν), likely instilled renewed assurance among the Johannine Christians. It is reasonable to surmise, therefore, that these people experienced emotional release or catharsis (Shiner 2003: 58), 'rejoiced for the encouragement' (Acts 15.30) the letter provided, and expressed their reaffirmed unity with the author through his designated envoy.

The Curtain Closes

The study of ancient media culture has the potential to transform the way we think about and experience texts, especially when the totality of media expression is considered. Regrettably, though, the dynamic manner in which such media avenues as textuality, orality/aurality, memory and performance operated in antiquity has been largely shrouded by modern, Western sensibilities. Our literary biases and dependence on electronic and digital communication and information storage tend to obscure our perception and consciousness of first-century media culture. Fortunately, over the course of the last few decades a number of scholars have chosen to pursue the path

of ancient media studies and apply the resulting insights to various biblical documents. Despite these advances, however, many texts await further exploration of their multi-media character, including probing their written nature, aural profiles and memory dynamics, and reconstruction of their original performances. For the Johannine corpus as well as other early Christian literature, the study of ancient media culture promises innovative means to explore texts in ways that enhance conventional modes of exegesis.