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INTRODUCTION

In 1967 Roland Barthes famously declared the "Death of the Author."[1] The proverbial death knell was not because Barthes disavowed the notion of the historical author. Rather, Barthes rejected the idea of privileging the author as an interpretive guide for understanding a literary work. The repudiation of this "myth" – that the hermeneutical task begins and ends with an appreciation of the author – paved the way for what Barthes suggested was a proper focus on the reader. According to Barthes, the reader is more than a complement to the author, a component of the literary process. The reader is the individual "who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted."[2] It is the reader who assimilates the textual details and is ultimately responsible for creating meaning. As Barthes provocatively stated, the emergence or "birth of the reader *must be* at the cost of the death of the Author."[3]

Not surprisingly, Barthes' essay sparked considerable debate, and the philosophical underpinnings of his approach remain a continued point of discussion.[4] Although many have argued that "reports of the author's death have been greatly exaggerated," the historical significance of Barthes' work is not in question.[5] Barthes advanced

[1] The essay was first published in English (Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen Magazine* 5–6 [1967], www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html) before appearing in the often-cited French version, Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur," *Manteia* 5 (1968): 12–17. The quotations here are from Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977a), 142–48. See also Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image – Music – Text*, 155–64.

[2] Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 148.

[3] Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 148, emphasis added.

[4] See the collection of essays in William Irwin, ed., *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002).

[5] The statement derives from Mark Twain's response to his erroneously reported death. For a discussion of the author's role in interpretation, see Peter A. Sutcliffe, *Is*

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one of the "most focused and influential critique[s] of the Romantic construction of authorship" and "offered a new understanding of the processes of textual production and reception."[6] "Cited in thousands of academic articles,"[7] the "Death of the Author" remains a foundational text that sparked a "seminal moment in the history of critical theory."[8] While the role of the author has undergone a kind of "resurrection" in recent decades, one of Barthes' lasting contributions was to draw attention to the neglected but crucial role of the reader.[9] Along with other scholars of his day, including Foucault and Derrida,[10] Barthes set in motion an agenda for a new wave of scholarship that spawned methodologies governed by reader-oriented approaches.

The far-reaching implications of this movement are difficult to quantify and traverse a myriad of disciplines, including the field of biblical studies. But whereas others were quick to explore and engage the theoretical possibilities of Barthes' work, intent to show that a "concern for the reader" is not "a commercial blemish on the otherwise spotless face of art," biblical scholars were slow to develop an appreciation for the text from the reader's perspective.[11] Some twenty years after the publication of Barthes' essay, Stephen Moore lamented that not only were biblical

There an Author in This Text?: Discovering the Otherness of the Text (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

[6] John Logie, "The (Re)Birth of the Composer," in *Composition and Copyright: Perspectives on Teaching, Text-Making, and Fair Use*, ed. Steve Westbrook (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 177.

[7] Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London: Routledge, 2013), 73.

[8] Lia Nicole Brozgal, *Against Autobiography: Albert Memmi and the Production of Theory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 21.

[9] Lucille Kerr, *Reclaiming the Author: Figures and Fictions from Spanish America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

[10] Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 63 (1969): 73–104; for an English translation see Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113–38. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hills Miller (New York, Seabury, 1979), 75–176.

[11] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 90.

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scholars entrenched in an "age of the text," but the "age of the reader" was "hardly at hand."[12]

Eventually, biblical scholars began to embark on a journey to understand the reader, and today the use of the term or one its various derivatives (e.g., model reader, ideal reader, implied reader, narratee) is commonplace in the discussion of biblical texts. Countless essays and books discussing the concept have been written, and, as Robert Fowler observes, the term has become a staple in the field, regardless of the hermeneutical perspective being adopted:

> Some time ago I fell into the habit of taking note of places in the scholarly literature on Mark where critics mention the reader or the reading experience. I soon found that marking with red pencil the comments about what "the reader knows," "the reader infers," "the reader questions," "the reader learns," "the reader recalls," and so on littered most articles and monographs. *I found also that the critic's avowed methodological approach did not make much difference*.[13]

Though anecdotal, this widespread reference to "the reader" is an indication of the strides that have been made. It may not have resulted in the "death of the author," as Barthes envisioned, but the ubiquitous use of the term reflects a more determined effort to understand the role and function of readers. That scholars across the hermeneutical spectrum have, to varying degrees, embraced the concept suggests that "the birth of the reader" has finally come of age in the field of biblical studies.

The question, however, is to what degree this progress has advanced the conversation. It may be that the broad usage of the terminology suggests a kind of development, but it likewise reveals continued confusion about the communicative process. Indeed, if a discussion about the earliest stages of the NT is in view, the repeated and consistent reference to the "reader" only shrouds problematic assumptions that have stunted other conversations. General usage of the term may seem justified as the biblical texts are written artifacts, and Matthew and Mark both seemingly affirm the concept of the

12 Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 73.

13 Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 15, emphasis added.

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reader ("let the reader understand," Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14). However, to conclude that reading was the predominant interpretive method ignores broader social realities and misunderstands the parenthetic remark in Matthew and Mark, which, as Collins observes, is directed "to the individual who read the Gospel *aloud* to a group of assembled followers."[14] Though it is true that the archaeological record reflects an abundance of chirographic evidence, it does not follow that the majority of individuals were capable of reading the kinds of texts found in the NT. In this respect, it may be helpful to think of "literacies" or various types of literacy in the ancient world.[15] Deciphering a business ledger or simple inscription may represent a form of literacy, but these activities should not be confused with the skills necessary to compose and/or read sophisticated literary documents.[16] When considering the spectrum of "literacies," there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that the majority of individuals were competent to read the types of documents that eventually found their way into the NT.[17] Most who came into contact with early Christian traditions in the ancient world likely did so through the medium of orality. While physical "texts" may have been present, these "texts" were typically experienced as a tapestry of sound and visual expressions.

Despite the strides that have been made and the shift toward "the reader," the turn has not gone far enough. To suggest that early Christian communities were composed primarily of "readers" not

[14] Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 608, emphasis added.

[15] William A. Johnson and Holt N. Parker, *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). The notion of multiple "literacies" follows a trend in other fields of study. See, for example, David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanič, eds., *Situated Literacies: Theorising Reading and Writing in Context* (London: Routledge, 2000); James Collins and Richard K. Blot, *Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[16] Michael C. A. Macdonald, "Literacy in an Oral Environment," in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society Papers in Honor of Alan R. Millard*, ed. Piotr Bienkowski, Christopher Mee, and Elizabeth Slater (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 49–118; Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992a), 8.

[17] William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Meir Bar-Ilan, "Illiteracy in the Land of Israel in the First Centuries CE," in *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society*, ed. Simcha Fishbane, Stuart Schoenfeld, and Alain Goldschlaeger (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992), 2:46–61; Alan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

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only assumes too much, it inadvertently points the conversation in the wrong direction. By adopting this perspective, the discussion has unwittingly embraced misleading assumptions that have undergirded biblical studies for centuries, all the while ignoring foundational questions that are crucial to the interpretive task.[18] How does hearing and seeing a performance differ from the modern, private reading experience? What is the role and function of audiences in the communal event of performance? What factors influence audience experience? How are we to understand the hermeneutical process in an oral/aural context?[19] These questions, which have often been ignored in the field of biblical studies, are at the heart of this exploratory project. In conversation with a host of disciplines, this study will consider several ways in which audience experience is shaped by the dynamics of performance.

Performance and Performance Scenarios

Before delving into these questions, it will be helpful to lay the groundwork for the study by considering several key terms and ideas. Though some of these discussions have been dealt with in greater detail elsewhere, a few comments are in order.[20]

Defining Performance

Performance may seem like a relatively straightforward concept, but the notion of performance has a number of interpretive possibilities.[21] For example, performance can be used to describe the relative success or accomplishment of a person, business, university, and so

[18] Werner Kelber was one of the first to critique the print-centric bias among biblical scholars. Among his many publications, see Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

[19] Any references to orality necessarily assume the corresponding notion of aurality, even if not explicitly stated.

[20] See, for example, William Doan and Terry Giles, *Prophets, Performance, and Power: Performance Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 11–17; Peter S. Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 27–38; Pieter J. J. Botha, "The Gospel of Mark, Orality Studies, and Performance Criticism," *R&T* 25 (2018): 350–93.

[21] Philip Auslander, "General Introduction," in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (London: Routledge, 2003), 1:1–24; Paul Allain and Jen Harvie, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* (London: Routledge, 2006), 181–82; Marvin Carlson, *Performance:*

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on. As a case in point, a parent might send a note to a teacher inquiring about their child's "performance" on a recent test. In such a context, the term has an evaluative nuance and is used to determine the relative degree of progress or achievement against some implicit or explicit standard. Performance can also evoke a broader field of meaning and is sometimes used to describe social behavior in general. Because individuals live and breathe in social contexts and thus "play a role," some have regarded these culturally recognized patterns of behavior as a kind of performance that is enacted within everyday activities.[22] As a result, some scholars use performance as a circumlocution to describe virtually all human activity.

In view of this semantic range, many have found the concept of performance "notoriously difficult to define," but it is also why the term has been adopted in diverse fields such as art, literature, theatre, and the social sciences.[23] Consider a few attempts to define the term. Goffman, for example, describes performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants."[24] Fischer-Lichte suggests that performance is "any event in which all participants find themselves in the same place at the same time, partaking in a circumscribed set of activities."[25] Davies argues that performance involves "actions aimed at achieving some result, but are also open, at least in principle, to public scrutiny and assessment."[26] To some degree, these broad definitions are due to the diverse ways and fields in which the concept of performance is employed. While there is overlap between definitions – in particular, the assumption that

A Critical Introduction, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 1–8; Elizabeth Bell, *Theories of Performance* (London: Sage, 2008), 15–18; Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 28–51; Simon Shepherd, *The Cambridge Introduction to Performance Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1–53.

[22] Allain and Harvie, *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, 181.

[23] Vayos Liapis, Costas Panayotakis, and George W.M. Harrison, "Introduction: Making Sense of Ancient Performance," in *Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre*, ed. George W. M. Harrison and Vayos Liapis, Mnemosyne Supplements: Monographs on Greek and Latin Language and Literature 353 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1.

[24] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959), 15.

[25] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, ed. Minou Arjomand and Ramona Mosse, trans. Minou Arjomand (London: Routledge, 2014), 18.

[26] David Davies, *Philosophy of the Performing Arts*, Foundations of the Philosophy of the Arts 4 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 5–6.

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performance involves two or more people – there are also discernable points of emphasis that distinguish the perspectives. For example, does performance require an event – whether formal or informal – or is it constituted by *any* activity? Must performance be intentional or have a discernable aim to influence another? And to what degree must performance be open to public scrutiny?

Rather than view these conflicting perspectives as an inherent problem, some have suggested that certain concepts – like performance, art, or democracy – are "*essentially contested*."[27] That is, the matrix of ideas associated with these concepts is so intrinsically complex that terms like this cannot be exhausted by a singular, all-encompassing definition. Disagreement and debate are therefore not only possible but expected. Scholars should not aim "to defeat or silence opposing positions, but rather through continuing dialogue to attain a sharper articulation of all positions and therefore a fuller understanding of the conceptual richness."[28] Given the competing, overlapping, and variegated uses of performance across a spectrum of disciplines, it is not surprising that many scholars have adopted this perspective. Carlson argues that it is futile to seek an "overarching semantic field to cover such seemingly disparate usages as the performance of an actor, of a schoolchild, of an automobile."[29] Shepherd and Wallis suggest that performance is a "mediumless genre" that is "too heterogeneous to be captured by 'essential definitions.'"[30] Likewise, States concludes that "a definition of performance … is a semantic impossibility."[31] Such acknowledgments are not indicative of a lack of intellectual rigor or scholarly deficiency but instead reflect thoughtful appraisal of this multifaceted and complex term.

In view of these inherent challenges, it is not the goal of this study to offer an overarching definition of performance. However, because

[27] Mary S. Strine, Beverly Whitaker Long, and Mary Frances Hopkins, "Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities," in *Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Speech Communication Association*, ed. Gerald M. Phillips and Julia T. Wood (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 183, emphasis original.

[28] Strine, Long, and Hopkins, "Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies," 183.

[29] Carlson, *Performance*, 5.

[30] Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis, *Drama/Theatre/Performance*, The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2004), 82.

[31] Bert O. States, "Performance as Metaphor," in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (London: Routledge, 2003), 1:110.

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the focus of this monograph is limited to the presentation of early Christian traditions in the ancient world, I offer a more restricted, working definition that is applicable to the context of this study. The definition is borrowed from Richard Schechner, who has been an influential figure in the world of performance studies. While the definition arises from contemporary studies of performance, it provides a helpful starting point for the discussion. According to Schechner, a "performance is an activity done by an individual or group in the presence of and for another individual or group."[32] While some may find this definition too broad and others too restrictive, the definition draws needed attention to the audience–performer(s) relationship and highlights an aspect of interpretation that has been widely neglected by biblical scholars. Though performance is a contested term, Schechner's definition will be adopted for this study with the caveat that performance is a communal affair that typically involves more than one audience member.[33]

Performance Scenarios/Styles

If performance involves both audience and performer(s), the question remains as to what "activity" unites the two in the performative event. In the broader spectrum of performance studies, this activity may take on any number of diverse forms, but the performance of early Christian traditions, such as the gospels, has a more discernable – though still flexible – shape.

Given the kinds of "literacies" in the ancient world, it can be reasonably asserted that the "activity done by an individual or

[32] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2003), 22 n. 10. Schechner's definition is remarkably similar to Bernard Beckerman's (*Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis* [New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979], 10, emphasis original): theatre occurs "*when one or more human beings, isolated in time and/or space, present themselves to another or others.*" For both scholars, the audience is an indivisible component of the performance equation. In this respect, Christopher B. Balme (*The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 34) observes that a "performance without an audience is at best a rehearsal, at worst a hypothetical construct."

[33] David Rhoads suggests that performance entails "any oral telling/retelling of a brief or lengthy tradition – from saying to gospel – in a formal or informal context of a gathered community by trained or untrained performers – on the assumption that every telling was a lively recounting of that tradition." See David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Temple Studies – Part I," *BTB* 36 (2006a): 119.

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group" involves some form of communication typically involving the oralization of early Christian traditions using verbal and visual cues. Unfortunately, this generalization only raises difficult questions about the particulars of the performative event. On the one hand, some have argued that the traditions were delivered entirely from memory since various Greek, Roman, and Jewish sources suggest that orators and lectors often trained for such practices.[34] It has even been suggested that some texts were both delivered from memory and composed from traditions that were created in oral performance.[35] On the other hand, Larry Hurtado has argued that these proposals represent a gross "oversimplification" of the evidence and that there is "no indication" that any of the NT texts were delivered from memory or composed in performance.[36] Even if some of the texts originated through oral dictation, this should not be confused with a process whereby traditions were composed in the act of performance. Nor should one confuse the memorized recitation of texts with how traditions were passed along to communities through public acts of "skillful reading."[37]

Still more discussion concerns the manner in which the traditions were communicated. Many have argued that ancient storytellers utilized an array of techniques to convey their message, including vocal intonation, facial expressions, gestures, and body movement.[38] Shiner has even suggested that the use of these communicative tools

[34] See, for example, William D. Shiell, *Delivering from Memory: The Effect of Performance on the Early Christian Audience* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 20–23.

[35] Pieter J. J. Botha, "Mark's Story as Oral Traditional Literature: Rethinking the Transmission of Some Traditions about Jesus," *HvTSt* 47 (1991): 304–31; Joanna Dewey, "The Survival of Mark's Gospel: A Good Story?" *JBL* 123 (2004): 495–507; David Rhoads, "What Is Performance Criticism?" in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance*, ed. Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, Biblical Performance Criticism 1 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 83–100; Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Case for Mark Composed in Performance*, Biblical Performance Criticism 3 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

[36] Larry W. Hurtado, "Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies? 'Orality,' 'Performance' and Reading Texts in Early Christianity," *NTS* 60 (2014): 336–39.

[37] Hurtado, "Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies," 321.

[38] Thomas E. Boomershine, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Whitney Taylor Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003); Rhoads, "Performance Criticism – Part 1," 126–27; David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Temple Studies – Part II," *BTB* 36 (2006b): 164–84; Richard F. Ward and David J. Trobisch, *Bringing the Word to Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 3–31; Holly E. Hearon, "Characters in Text and Performance," in *From Text to Performance: Narrative and Performance Criticisms in Dialogue and Debate*, ed.

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was quite "bombastic" by modern standards.[39] Therefore, to ignore these elements misconstrues the interpretive process and results in what Boomershine refers to as "media eisegesis."[40] Hurtado again suggests that these conclusions are misguided and represent a fundamental category mistake.[41] Though acknowledging that lectors made use of effective vocal strategies (including pauses, pacing, etc.), Hurtado argues that performance critics have confused the practices of orators and actors with the typical delivery techniques adopted by lectors. Unlike orators and actors, according to Hurtado, lectors were "always seated," "always had a text open," did not use their hands, and "avoided facial expressions."[42]

There is little doubt that these issues raise interesting questions for discussion, even if they are largely tangential to the present study. Nonetheless, it is important to offer a few brief reflections. To begin, it appears that the discussion has been framed as a false choice. To assume that these issues can be reduced to an either/or distinction (i.e., texts were performed with expression and vigor or read with minimal emotion; texts were performed from memory or read by lectors) ignores the possibility that performances took on variegated and diverse forms depending on the context. The complexity of the discussion is evident, for example, in a fascinating letter from Pliny the Younger to Suetonius (*Ep.* 9.34 [Radice, LCL]). In the letter, Pliny writes to obtain counsel regarding an upcoming performance of his poetry. Pliny has been told that he "reads badly" and has decided to employ a lector for the oral reading of his work, even though the lector is only slightly more effective than he. Pliny's dilemma is whether he should remain in the audience as a spectator during the reading of his work or "do as some people and accompany his [i.e., the lector's] words with low voice, eye, and gesture," thus providing mime-like, visual expression to the lector's spoken word (*Ep.* 9.34 [Radice, LCL]). Though Pliny's description is admittedly brief and raises a host of questions, the envisioned scenario complexifies the discussion, evidencing what some regard as the inevitable and natural cross-fertilization between various genres of

Kelly R. Iverson, Biblical Performance Criticism 10 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 53–79; Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism*, 21–72.

[39] Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 88.

[40] Thomas E. Boomershine, "Peter's Denial as Polemic or Confession: The Implications of Media Theory for Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 39 (1987): 48.

[41] Hurtado, "Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies," 334–35.

[42] Hurtado, "Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies," 334.

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