

# The translation of *biblion* and *biblos* in the light of oral and scribal practice



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The Bible was composed both by way of oral tradition and by scribal activity. Various descriptions exist of the development and relationship of the dominant forms of orality and scribal tradition throughout the history of media culture. Utilising the insights of, and debate on, the field of Biblical Performance Criticism, this article argues for an articulated description of the interrelationship of oral and written. The article argues that these two aspects cannot be absolutely separated, either chronologically or in terms of importance, neither can they be ignored as part of a coherent model to depict the media history of the Bible. In the light of this model the article discusses the interpretation and translation of the words βιβλίον and βιβλος, which are sometimes misunderstood and mistranslated, because of a failure to understand the process of committing the oral biblical tradition to a preferred writing medium.

## Introduction

The Bible is sometimes perceived of, and interpreted as, a single written and printed book despite the fact that the history of media culture shows how the biblical text shifted over time from oral, scribal, print and electronic forms in accordance with the relevant technological developments (Fowler 2009; Littau 2011). The field of Biblical Performance Criticism supports the claim that the ancient Mediterranean societies and cultures were predominantly oral. It is important, then, for scholars to use the oral and scribal culture as a frame for biblical interpretation, rather than the modern mentality of print culture (Rhoads 2012).

The Bible was composed both by way of oral tradition and scribal activity; these two aspects cannot be absolutely separated, either chronologically or in terms of importance (Carr 2005, 2011; De Vries 2012; Walton & Sandy 2013). This oral-written interface means that, on the one hand, there are oral features of the biblical tradition, some of which we have access to as 'fossilised' remnants within the written text (Rhoads 2012). On the other hand, there are written features that relate both to the scribal work of the author(s) and to the influence of scribal redaction and transmission (Polak 1998; 2013).

The article builds on the assumption that not only the nature of reading and writing, but also translation practices are directly informed and shaped by the dominant media forms and the material concerned – the human body (voice), tablet (clay, wax), scroll, codex, book (papyrus, parchment, paper), and computer or mobile device (screen) (Littau 2011:261). The history of media culture has provided various descriptions of the development and relationship of the dominant forms of orality and scribal tradition. This article argues for a nuanced description of the interrelationship of oral and written culture in the social world of the Bible using the insights of, and debate on, the field of Biblical Performance Criticism. As part of the development of a coherent model of the media history of the Bible, the oral and the written cannot be separated absolutely, either chronologically or in terms of importance, nor can they be ignored. This article provides a new analysis of the interpretation and translation of the terms βιβλίον and βιβλος, which are sometimes misunderstood and mistranslated because of a failure to understand the oral and scribal practices during biblical times. The research presented here draws upon and expands previous explorations of orality and performance as a means to convey the alterity of the Bible in translation (Miller-Naudé & Naudé in-press[a]) as well as the relationship between orality and stylistic variation in the Hebrew Bible (Miller-Naudé & Naudé in-press[b]).

The article is organised as follows. In the second section, Biblical Performance Criticism and its claims concerning the oral culture of the Bible are introduced. In the third section, the

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interrelationship of oral and written culture is described. In the fourth section, the relationship of orality to scribal culture is explored. In the fifth section, the meaning of the terms βιβλίον and βιβλος is established and possibilities for their translation are proposed. In the sixth section, we present our conclusions.

## Biblical performance criticism

The field of Biblical Performance Criticism recognises ancient Israel and the early Church as situated in predominantly oral cultures. The traditions now in the Bible were originally experienced as oral performances. Biblical Performance Criticism goes beyond orality and it does not simply involve storytelling. Instead, it involves story creation through the performance event and presupposes a community as the biblical texts are passed down through tradition, both oral and written.

A translation created for a print culture is focused on a single meaning of the text and is concerned with conveying the intention of the author faithfully. It has in view the individual reader of the text and the cognitive sense which that reader will make of the text. A translation created for oral performance, by contrast, is focused on the potential for creative meaning of the text in the oral register. It has in view the ways in which the text can potentially impact an audience with an emotional collective experience (Rhoads 2012:24). Biblical Performance Criticism attempts to recreate ancient performances of the biblical text as a means to interpret anew the traditions of the Bible (Maxey 2012:2–3). This is important for Bible translation because it pertains to translations of performance (antiquity) and translations for performance (today). If the Bible is not intended for silent reading, how then does the public performance mode of communication affect the translation of the biblical material (Maxey 2012:15)? In answering this question, Maxey narrates the epistemological move from sound to performance features such as movement, physical expression and gestures in orality studies and translation studies.

There are different views concerning the original contexts of performance in the ancient Mediterranean and how orality functioned socially as well as its essential nature. An overview of these viewpoints will be provided in the next section. The knowledge of how the contents of the Bible were experienced by the first Christians provides an understanding of the media history of the Bible prior to printing.

## Interrelationship of oral and written Oral formulaic theory and the binary division of orality versus literacy

In biblical studies, Hermann Gunkel (1930; 1967) championed the view that oral traditions lie behind the written text, based in part on Wilhelm Wundt's folk psychology (Miller 2011). This research led to a characterisation of a dichotomy between

oral cultures and literate cultures, which was viewed as absolute and universal. The oral formulaic theory of Parry and Lord on storytelling in Yugoslavia has promoted this viewpoint. Their research discovered striking similarities between those 20th century oral performances and what can be inferred about oral performances in the ancient world, such as Homer's performances of the epic poems known as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Parry 1971; Lord 2000). The oral formulaic theory is also associated with the scholars Ong (1982) and Goody (2000). Havelock (1986:65) describes the oral world in terms of societies which do not use any form of writing. Jousse (2000) goes further, describing the oral world as consisting of societies which have never been introduced to writing.

## Four eras of the history of communication media

Ong (1982), Fowler (2009:3–18) and Littau (2011:261–281) divide the history of communication media into four eras. Fowler associated each era with a specific kind of Bible. However, note that the divide between orality and literacy is retained.

### Oral/aural communication and the oral/aural Bible

Paleoanthropologists estimate that humans had the physical capability and cultural inclination to engage in oral communication 50 000 years ago. The oldest contents of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament were communicated orally without benefit of writing (Fowler 2009:7–8). Ancient oral/aural peoples were comfortable enough with the spoken word to get by with it for vast ages of human history (Fowler 2009:7).

Fowler (2009:6) stresses that the practice of oral communication is open, flexible and fluid despite the cultural conservatism of many oral/aural cultures. The implication is that no two performances are ever identical.

### Manuscript communication and the manuscript Bible

Writing systems were invented in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt in the fourth millennium BCE. During the second millennium BCE the consonantal alphabet was invented and the Phoenicians spread the use of this Semitic alphabet throughout the Mediterranean. The Greeks adapted the Semitic alphabet by adding vowels from the 8th century BCE. All writing was manuscript ('written by hand') or handwriting and no more than 10% to 20% of the population could read or write (Fowler 2009:9). When biblical books began to be written on papyrus or parchment, few people could afford to own or read them. Most people would have still experienced biblical texts as oral/aural, that is, as speaking/hearing performance.

Fowler (2009:9–10) also provides a description of manuscript practice: manuscripts were often not written by the hand of the author, but were dictated by the author to a secretary.

If read, a manuscript was read aloud, not silently. Manuscripts were memorised and recited from memory. Citations in the New Testament may be citations from memory. Just as no two oral performances were ever the same, no two manuscript copies of a book were ever alike.

### Print communication and the printed Bible

In 1440 the world changed dramatically with the invention of printing by Johann Gutenberg (McLuhan 1962). The translated Bible was mass-produced, leading to widespread literacy and the expansion of knowledge. Memorisation of the biblical text became an exceptional achievement as the text existed primarily on the printed page rather than in the mind.

### Electronic communication and the electronic Bible

In the electronic age, many aspects of ancient orality have re-emerged; this new media environment has been described as 'electronically aided orality' (Fowler 2009:14). Adam (2009:172) depicts it as a transition from a typographic interpretive culture to a digital-media interpretive culture. The visual has not supplanted words, but it becomes more prominent as a contextual supplement to words.

### Oral-written interfaces in the ancient Mediterranean

The universalistic approach to oral cultures together with the simplistic binary division of orality versus literacy is not any longer accepted and the earlier views of orality have been criticised as 'romantic' (De Vries 2012:68–98). As De Vries notes, absolute orality is rare among the cultures of the world; instead, even seemingly oral cultures are involved in an oral-written interface. Precisely how the oral-written interface is manifested is locally determined and may vary even within a single culture with respect to time, place or genre. Furthermore, the oral and written coevolve through many points of contact (De Vries 2012:74–75). On the basis of the research of Carr (2005; 2011), De Vries further argues that the complex interplay of oral and written communicational strategies can also be discerned within the literary features of the biblical text.

### Hearing-dominant versus text-dominant

Another way to conceptualise the oral-written interface within the literary cultures of the ancient Mediterranean has been suggested by Walton and Sandy (2013:18). They contrast hearing-dominant cultures with text-dominant cultures. In hearing-dominant cultures, traditions were passed on by word of mouth; in text-dominant cultures, traditions were passed on by scribally produced texts. In the ancient Mediterranean, literacy was not absent in hearing-dominant societies. It was the scribes who were capable of reading and writing. There was no need for common people or even elites to become literate to function. In an ancient hearing-dominant society, texts are largely documents written for a much more limited number of reasons than in a text-dominant culture

(Walton & Sandy 2013:21). A culture's traditions were internalised whilst copies of texts were written for archives and libraries and served as reference points for recitation and memorisation of the tradition (Carr 2005:6). Documents were written to be read aloud (Jr 36). Although Israelite society became increasingly literate during the monarchy period, hearing dominance continued through the Greco-Roman period up until the invention of the moveable-type printing press (Schniedewind 2004:2).

The exposition above serves to justify the following model which we previously proposed to depict the relation between the oral and the written throughout history (Makutoane, Miller-Naudé & Naudé 2015):

#### *Hearing-dominant*

Oral/aural-written communication/verbal interpretive culture.

(1) Oral/aural communication (the oral/aural Bible).

(2) Handwritten manuscript communication (manuscript Bible).

#### *Text-dominant*

Print communication (printed Bible)/typographic interpretive culture.

Electronic/media communication (electronic Bible)/digital-media interpretive culture.

It is important to note that what is depicted in this media history are *dominant* modalities of communication in the process of development. Handwritten manuscripts, for example, whilst they are characteristic of the hearing-dominant period, are still found in the modern world in some religious traditions (e.g. handwritten scrolls are used within Jewish liturgical contexts; handwritten codices of the Qur'an are used within Islam). Furthermore, the oral plays a role in every stage: in the cultural and aesthetic practices of pre-modern traditions, in modernist representations of the past and in audiovisual media and postmodernist expressions of artistry (Bandia 2011:108).

What is not depicted in this model of media history or described in our previous expositions of the model (e.g. Makutoane *et al.* 2015) is the role of the visual, which was assumed. However, it is important to provide an outline with representative examples of the role of the visual at each stage in order to avoid any misconceptions. Visuality played an integral role in the oral/aural Bible through the appearance, movements and gestures of the performers in the oral performance. The visuality of the performers and their movements provide an iconic link to the content of the biblical text (Rhoads 2012). However, the oral/aural Bible was fully functional without visuality; in other words, a person who could not see the performance could participate orally/aurally. In this sense, the visual aspects of the performance provide additional information (i.e. metatexts) to guide the hearers/performers in their participation in the performed text.

Visuality played numerous roles in the manuscript Bible. The shapes of letters, the arrangement of letters, words, phrases

and larger portions in writing all play a communicative role alongside the oral-written text. The visual representation of the interface between speech and writing in the Qumran texts through the use of stichography has recently been explored by S. Miller (2015). In his interpretation of the manuscript evidence, scribes at Qumran sometimes used their scribal copies as a means to convey features of an oral performance of the text. As another example, the work of the Masoretes in representing both the received written, consonantal text and the oral, vocalised text together with its accentual and intonational features, highlights the visuality of the text and its mediating role between oral and written (Khan 2013). As a third example, the tradition of illuminated biblical codices incorporated performative aspects of the oral Bible into the written Bible through illustrations of the text (e.g. Morgan 1982; 1988; Sullivan & Bruun 1986). Furthermore, the visual lay-out of illuminated Bibles contributed to the oral reading of the text, through, for example, illuminated letters to begin chapters or sections of the text.

In early printed Bibles, the visuality of the text continued in many ways the scribal traditions of the manuscript Bibles. In the influential English translation of the Geneva Bible (1560), for example, 26 woodcuts were placed alongside the text in the Pentateuch, Kings and Ezekiel in order to elucidate difficult passages, a large display letter began the first word of each chapter, and a table of names was given at the end of the Bible to assist readers in pronouncing them orally (Berry 2007:12–13). Additional features of the visuality of printed Bibles include the typefaces used and their colours (e.g. ‘red-letter’ editions for the words of Jesus), the columnal format, the formatting in chapters and verses (or simply paragraphs), the kind of paper (‘Bible paper’), the type of cover, and so forth.

In the digital-media interpretive culture, the Bible can be presented in electronic formats with oral-written-visual interfaces (e.g. in video). In this regard, the visual mediates between the oral and the written and guides the interpretation of both.

Visuality, then, plays a role with respect to the oral and to the written, as a permeating metatext alongside the oral-written text of the Bible in every era. (For the role of metatexts in Bible translation, see Miller-Naudé & Naudé 2015; Naudé 2009; 2012; 2013; Naudé & Miller-Naudé 2012). The precise role and relationship of visuality to oral and written is different in the multitude of contexts in which the Bible is produced and used, but the complex interrelationship of visual to oral and written formed one of the central semiotic concerns for the translation of the Bible, a relationship that we hope to explore in more detail in future research.

## Oral and scribal practice during biblical times

Rhoads (2012:26–30) conveys the opinion that, like musical composers, the performers who created stories and speeches probably did not write down their compositions, but composed them in their imagination or orally. The scrolls

provided a written record of the performance to assist the performer in remembering the performance so that it could be recreated again in the future. However, he considers it likely that these oral compositions were also passed on as memories of performances without the aid of a manuscript. He describes the writings preserved in the New Testament as ‘fossil’ remains of living oral performances.

Hurtado (2014:321–340) critiqued the claims of Rhoads (2012) as oversimplifications and distortions, especially the claim that in early Christian circles texts were performed from memory as oratorical delivery of speeches or theatrical performance, and were not read. He further dismissed the suggestion of Wire (2011), Botha (2012) and Dewey (2013) that the Gospel of Mark was composed in performance and the existing text is perhaps only a transcript of a performance. In his view, the fallacy is that their emphasis on orality minimises the role of texts and the activities associated with them (for example, writing, reading, copying) (Hurtado 2014:323–324). They failed to take the Roman-era setting into account, which Hurtado (2014) considers critical. His argument is based on the quantity of written deposits: ‘As reflected in the many thousands of manuscripts that survive from the Roman period, the many literary works produced and circulated, the many inscriptions and the many kinds of “documentary” texts (letters, contracts, business/commercial documents, *et al.*), writings were not mere appendages to the spoken word but were important in themselves as a major factor in many areas of life and among various levels and sectors of societies’ (Hurtado 2014:324). Note that the quantity refers mainly to documentary texts (shipping labels, posters, inscriptions, street signs, etc.) and graffiti as attested mainly at Pompeii. Based on research of various classical texts, his claim is that authors wrote for the eye of individual readers (acrostics, picture poems) and not for group or oral performances and thereby he rejected the notion that Roman-era writing served simply as a tool to record speech (Hurtado 2014:324–327).

Writing and reading rather than dictation have a strong place in composing oratory, which was the real oral event in the Roman period (Hurtado 2014:334–335). The written text serves as the model for the actual speech as delivered and not the other way around. Roman-era readers were also quite able to read silently and privately (for example, letters and poetry). For Hurtado (2014:325, 338–339), the Roman period is a time of rich interplay of texts and readers (both private and to/before groups), writers and speakers, and appreciation of both oral/aural and written expressions of thought and entertainment, and it is a fallacy to make the one subservient to the other in any generalising way. Hurtado (2014:330–334) further questions the argument that only a small minority of the Roman-era populace was literate, thus marginalising the likely place of texts in non-elite circles. He refers to recent studies of education in the Roman imperial era which emphasise that the period actually seems to have been one of comparatively wider and greater literacy than any time before it, and probably greater than in the subsequent medieval period as well. However, he acknowledges that the



majority of the Roman-era population may have been functionally illiterate.

In his criticism Hurtado himself oversimplifies and puts misconceptions on the table. In our view, it is more insightful to follow a middle-of-the-road position. As will be argued in what follows, the situation is more complex and less rigid than it is portrayed in Biblical Performance Criticism, on the one hand, and by Hurtado, on the other. As argued above, the simplistic binary of oral versus written is no longer accepted. Instead, the oral and written cannot be separated and cannot be viewed chronologically; the oral-written interface is the main feature in all phases of the model.

The complex roles and relationships of oral and written language in the Mediterranean world are provided by Sanders (2009). For two millennia the Near Eastern kingdoms shared cuneiform as a script (not a language) (see also Gelb 1963:60–165). In the early Iron Age, the Levant was ruled by the Egyptian empire, which used Babylonian cuneiform as an administrative tool but not as a form of expression. This cosmopolitan writing system's lack of inherent connection with spoken language was an advantage for the outstretched empire and its linguistically unrelated agents. School texts were used to train scribes in the non-living languages of Sumerian and Old Babylonian. Scribes used writing to list people and things that the empire owned and to write letters for officials who could not have understood each other in person. It was the only way everyone involved could communicate. In our view, the situation in the ancient Near East was similar in quantity and nature to the one depicted by Hurtado (2014) concerning the documentary texts (shipping labels, posters, inscriptions, street signs, etc.) and graffiti as attested mainly in Pompeii. However, the Canaanite alphabetic texts of the Iron Age played a role that was very different from cuneiform texts (Tappy & McCarter 2008). By utilising oral genres, the newly written discourses used the technology of alphabetic writing of West Semitic. Writers inscribed the oral tradition: laws that directly addressed a collective 'you' whether singular or plural (not third-person subjects), prophecies addressed to people, songs of protest and complaint, monuments by workmen, and so forth. This seems a situation more parallel to the oral and scribal practices of biblical times.

Furthermore, one has to acknowledge that there are a variety of ways in which texts were performed, recited and read. In this regard there is evidence from the liturgical use of the Aramaic *targumim* (*targum* is based on the Aramaic word for 'translation'). The dates of the *targumim* range between the 1st or 2nd century CE to the 7th or 8th century (Flesher & Chilton 2011:x). The public performance of Aramaic translation formed part of the Bet Knesset, the synagogue, rather than the Bet Midrash, the study house (Flesher & Chilton 2011:ix). Reading the Torah and the Prophets aloud and listening to them continued to form a central element of the synagogue service throughout the ancient period. To contend with the lack of knowledge of Hebrew among the Jews, the rabbis permitted Greek translations to be used in

place of the Hebrew, but they did not want Aramaic-speaking Jews to replace the Hebrew text with an Aramaic version as had been done with the Septuagint. The rabbis wanted them to read the Hebrew text aloud; the participants could also listen to an oral Aramaic rendering if they wished (Flesher & Chilton 2011:4). The Aramaic renderings were to be given from memory (Flesher & Chilton 2011:4) contra Hurtado's rigid view concerning performance from memory. Flesher & Chilton (2011:6) describe the practice as follows: '... two men stand in front, one behind a podium on which is spread a large scroll is spread. The other stands to the side with nothing in front of him. The first man reads from the scroll in Hebrew, of which the audience again understands little ... When the first man stops, the second one gives his translation in Aramaic ...'. Written copies of the text stand as a permanent reference point for the oral translation. However, one must take into account that literary and silent reading occur in all phases of the model, but they are prominent during print communication.

Literacy is relative (one can read elementary documentary texts with fixed formulas more easily than complex literary texts) and is a factor in all the phases of the model. Rollston (2010:xv-xvi) rejects the view that the Old Hebrew writing system was so facile that it required minimal training. Instead, reading required the type of sophistication acquired through formal standardised education; the Israelite scribe was a thoroughly educated member of the elite classes. Rollston (2010:91–114) demonstrates within the field of educational psychology that it is naive to assume that a child learning her or his first alphabetic system could do so easily and in a short period of time. The implication is that the literacy rates in Israel were not high and, as a result, one cannot assume that people from various strata of society could read and write. In addition to scribes, certain elite officials were capable of reading and writing, but not the average pastoralist or agriculturalist in Israelite society. The view that there is no evidence for widespread literacy of non-elite masses in ancient Israel is supported by the analysis of 31 excavation reports by Jamieson-Drake (2011). Except for a few specialists in towns who could read and write, the majority of the population was too busy trying to survive to worry about mastering the technicalities of literacy. This evidence dismisses the view of Millard (1972) and others who view writing as theoretically possible for any ordinary Israelite and widespread, rather than the prerogative solely of an elite professional class.

The Hebrew Bible has always been produced, and continues to be produced, in scroll format but from the Islamic period onwards it has also been produced in codex format (see Brinkmann & Wiesmüller 2009 on codicology). From its inception the Qur'an was always written in codex format and the Hebrew Bible was first written as a codex under the influence of Islam (Griffith 2013:155–156; see also Stern 2008 on the 'codexification' of Judaism). Each format of the Hebrew Bible has a different function. The scroll is the ancient form of manuscript used for public liturgical reading in synagogues up to the present time, whereas the

codex format is used for study purposes and non-liturgical reading. The Masoretes considered it unacceptable to add any written additions to the biblical scrolls such as vocalisation, accents and marginal notes. However, because the codices were used for study purposes and non-liturgical reading, the Masoretes felt free to introduce into these types of manuscript the newly developed written Masoretic components (Khan 2013:6). The copying of the consonantal text was entrusted to a scribe known as a *sopher*, who also wrote scrolls. The vocalisation, accents and Masoretic notes were added by a scribe known as a *naqdan* [pointer or vocaliser] (Khan 2013:7). Then there were the professional *magihim* [correctors or revisers] to ensure that the text was copied correctly (Khan 2013:17). What is clear is that the tradition of transmitting the consonantal text and the tradition of transmitting the Masoretic components were not integrated. Contra Hurtado (2014:328–330) the book culture is not in conflict with oral practices of the transmission of biblical texts.

In the next section we consider the interpretation and translation of the terms βιβλίον and βιβλος, which are sometimes misunderstood and mistranslated because of a failure to understand the process of committing the oral biblical tradition on a preferred writing medium.

## Interpretation and translation of the terms βιβλίον and βιβλος

### Cultural background

The interpretation of the terms βιβλίον and βιβλος must first be examined against the background of the ancient Near East. The word רָצוּ (which occurs circa 190 times in Biblical Hebrew) refers to something written, an inscription, letter, list or scroll and not to a book (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1979:706–707; Koehler & Baumgartner 2001:766–767). In Ugaritic *spr* refers to an inscription, letter or document (Gordon 1965:451). Likewise, the Akkadian *šipru* refers to mission, message, work, or task and there is no word per se for the concept ‘book’ (Von Soden 1981:1245–1246). In the Septuagint, βιβλος, or more commonly βιβλίον, is a translation of Biblical Hebrew רָצוּ, and its meaning is fixed by its usage in the Hebrew Bible (Schrenk 1964:615). It refers to anything written (for example, a scroll, document, or letter). The New Testament follows the practice of the Septuagint in using βιβλίον (34 times) more frequently than βιβλος (10 times) (Becker 1975:244). Particularly noticeable are the 23 occurrences of βιβλίον in Revelation alone (only 11 times in the rest of the New Testament) (Becker 1975:244). No difference of meaning can be found between the two forms.

Hossfeld and Reuter (1999:329) state that the preferred writing medium of committing the biblical tradition to writing was in the form of leather or papyrus scrolls, whilst the tablet as writing material mostly involves the tradition of the tablets of the law at Sinai. Seals and ostraca were restricted to daily matters.

The concept ‘book’ is dependent on the invention of the codex, the leaf-book, with pages which are written on both sides of the parchment or papyrus and which are bound together. The codex encompasses a collection of scrolls and defined their set and order in the work (Schniedewind 2013:47). The codex originated in the Hellenistic period. Hurtado and Keith (2013:66) mention the reference of the Roman poet Martial, who lived in the late 1st century, to the works of several authors available in small parchment-codex form (*brevibus membrane tabellis*). The codices of the 2nd century CE form 4% of the total number of all extant manuscripts of that century. The codex only became dominant in general usage in the 4th century CE. Gamble (1995:42–81) argues that some books of the New Testament were written in codices from their inception, a position which we do not find tenable. However, his claim that the codex was the ‘... heavily preferred form of the early Christian book well in advance of its broad adoption outside Christianity’ (Gamble 1995:81) is well substantiated. Therefore, the term ‘book’ in the sense of its physical form cannot be applied to biblical times. Although some have used the term ‘book’ anachronistically in its abstract sense as ‘... a work of literature, science or reference’ (Schniedewind 2013:48; see also Schubart 1921:1, 32–35), we do not share this viewpoint, because of the role of world view in cognition; something which is not existence cannot be a concept. Allen illustrates the incongruent use of ‘book’ in his introduction to an edition of the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*:

The ancient Egyptians would not have recognized the title of this book. The texts translated here were given the name ‘Book of the Dead’ in modern times because they are usually found in scrolls of papyrus or on other objects buried with the deceased of Egyptian tombs. The division of the texts into separate ‘spells’ (sometimes called ‘chapters’) and the numbers assigned to them are also modern interpolations. Most of the texts have individual ancient titles beginning with a word often translated as ‘spell’ but actually meaning something like ‘oration’, and the texts themselves regularly begin with a second term indicating that they were meant to be recited. (Allen 2005:11)

The *Book of the Dead* is thus a collection of texts which were intended for recitation; the texts were written on scrolls and not in codex format. The notion that it is a ‘book’ in any sense of the term is a modern invention.

## The use of βιβλίον and βιβλος in the New Testament

### βιβλίον in the New Testament

Firstly, the term βιβλίον refers in some instances to a record, notice or certificate, which are all relatively short statements in written form (Abbott-Smith 1937: 81; Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich 1957:140; Louw & Nida 1988 1:61, 2:46). Liddell and Scott (1940; 1976:315) give the definition of ‘strip of papyrus: hence, paper, document, petition, tablet’ (Mounce 2012:839 is similar; a scroll, bill, billet). According to Moulton and Milligin (1930:757) the term βιβλίον never meant a *little* writing; the diminutive was expressed by βιβλαρίδιον (for example, Rv 10:2, 8, 9, 10). Examples of the first usage of the term βιβλίον are found in Matthew 19:7 and Mark 10:4, where

it refers to a divorce document. In Biblical Hebrew, the concept is conveyed by *הַחֲרִיטָה* (Deuteronomy 24:1), which is translated in the Septuagint as *βιβλίον ἀποστασίου*. The usages in Matthew 19:7 and Mark 10:4 are similar:

### Matthew 19:7

λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· τί οὖν Μωϋσῆς ἐνετείλατο δοῦναι βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ ἀπολῦσαι [αὐτήν]:

They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?' (English Standard Version [ESV])

Other translations are similar: 'skeibrief' (*Die Bybel in Afrikaans* [Afr 53]; *Die Bybel in Afrikaans: 'n Nuwe Vertaling* [Afr 83]), 'bill of divorcement' (*American Standard Version* [ASV]), 'divorce certificate'. (The CEB [Common English Bible] Study Bible with Apocrypha)

### Mark 10:4

οἱ δὲ εἶπαν· ἐπέτρεψεν Μωϋσῆς βιβλίον ἀποστασίου γράψαι καὶ ἀπολῦσαι:

They said, 'Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away' (*New International Version* [NIV]). Other translations are similar: 'skeibrief' (Afr 53; Afr 83), 'bill of divorcement' (ASV), 'divorce certificate'. (CEB)

Secondly, the term *βιβλίον* refers to a scroll as a physical object. In this category dictionaries wrongly include the anachronistic term *book* (Abbott-Smith 1937:81; Bauer *et al.* 1957:140; Liddell & Scott 1940:315; Louw & Nida 1988 vol. 1:61, vol. 2:46; Mounce 2012:839 [a written volume or roll, book]). As a result, some versions utilise a wrong translation, namely: 'the book of the prophet Isaiah' (for example, the ASV, *King James Version* [KJV], *Revised Standard Version* [RSV]), also '... boek van die profeet Jesaja' (Afr 53; Afr 83). Consider the following verses and selected examples of alternative translations, primarily the CEB versus ASV.

### Luke 4:17

καὶ ἐπεδόθη αὐτῷ βιβλίον τοῦ προφήτου Ἡσαΐου καὶ ἀναπτύξας τὸ βιβλίον εὗρεν τὸν τόπον οὗ ἦν γεγραμμένον:

(3a) 'The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written'. (CEB)

Similar translations are '...een boekrol van de profeet Jesaja' (*Willibrordvertaling* [W95]), '... the scroll from the prophet Isaiah'. (ESV, *New English Translation* [NET], NIV, *New Revised Standard Version* [NRSV])

(3b) 'And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And he opened the book, and found the place where it was written'. (ASV)

Note that the verb *ἀναπτύξας* is translated literally in (3a) with 'unrolled'. However, in (3b), because a book cannot be unrolled, the verb must be translated with 'opened'.

### Luke 4:20

καὶ πτύξας τὸ βιβλίον ἀποδοὺς τῷ ὑπηρέτῃ ἐκάθισεν· καὶ πάντων οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ ἦσαν ἀτενίζοντες αὐτῷ:

(4a) 'He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him'. (CEB)

(4b) 'And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down: and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fastened on him'. (ASV)

(4c) 'Daarna rolde Hij het boek dicht, gaf het terug aan de dienaar en ging zitten. De ogen van allen in de synagoge waren op Hem gericht'. (W95)

The situation in (4) is the opposite of that in (3) – Jesus rolls up the scroll and returns it to the attendant. In (4a), the use of the word 'scroll' means that the verb *πτύξας* can be translated literally. In (4b), the use of the word 'scroll' results in the translation of the verb with 'closed'. In (4c), the literal translation of both the noun and the verb results in the implausible description of Jesus *rolling* up the book.

### Revelation 1:11

λεγούσης· ὁ βλέπεις γράψον εἰς βιβλίον καὶ πέμψον ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις, εἰς Ἔφεσον καὶ εἰς Σμύρναν καὶ εἰς Πέργαμον καὶ εἰς Θυάτειρα καὶ εἰς Σάρδεϊς καὶ εἰς Φιλαδέλφειαν καὶ εἰς Λαοδικεῖαν:

(5a) 'It said, "Write down on a scroll whatever you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea"'. (CEB)

(5b) '... saying, What thou seest, write in a book and send it to the seven churches: unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea'. (ASV)

(5c) '... en skryf wat jy sien in 'n boek en stuur dit na die sewe gemeentes wat in Asië is: na Éfese en Smirna en Pérgamus en Thiatíre en Sardis en Filadelfía en Laodicéa'. (Afr 53; Afr 83)

In 2 Timothy 4:13 consider the translation of CEB and NET ('scrolls'), *New American Bible* (NAB) ('papyrus rolls') versus the ASV ('books').

### 2 Timothy 4:13

τὸν φαίλονην ὃν ἀπέλιπον ἐν Τρωάδι παρὰ Κάρπῳ ἐρχόμενος φέρε, καὶ τὰ βιβλία μάλιστα τὰς μεμβράνας:

(6a) 'When you come, bring along the coat I left with Carpus in Troas. Also bring the scrolls and especially the parchments'. (CEB)

(6b) 'When you come, bring with you the cloak I left in Troas with Carpas and the scrolls, especially the parchments'. (NET)

(6c) 'When you come, bring the cloak I left with Carpus in Troas, the papyrus rolls, and especially the parchments'. (NAB)

(6d) 'The cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, bring when thou comest, and the books, especially the parchments'. (ASV)

So also: '... en die boeke, veral die perkamente' (Afr 53; Afr 83).

The consistency or inconsistency of translations can be seen by comparing the CEB, NET and ASV translations of 2 Timothy 4:13 in (6a), (6b), and (6d), respectively, to their translations of Hebrews 9:19.

**Hebrews 9:19**

λαληθείσης γὰρ πάσης ἐντολῆς κατὰ τὸν νόμον ὑπὸ Μωϋσέως παντὶ τῷ λαῷ, λαβὼν τὸ αἷμα τῶν μόσχων [καὶ τῶν τράγων] μετὰ ὕδατος καὶ ἐρίου κοκκίνου καὶ ὑσσώπου αὐτὸ τε τὸ βιβλίον καὶ πάντα τὸν λαὸν ἐρράντισεν:

(7a) 'Moses took the blood of calves and goats, along with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the Law scroll itself and all the people after he had proclaimed every command of the Law to all the people'. (CEB)

(7b) 'For when Moses had spoken every command to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats with water and scarlet wool and hyssop and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people'. (NET)

(7c) 'For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses unto all the people according to the law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people'. (ASV)

The Afrikaans similarly renders 'boek' (Afr 53; Afr 83).

The CEB is consistent with 'scroll/s', the NET uses 'scrolls' in (6b) and (6d) but 'book' in (7b) and (7c).

In Hebrews 10:7 the phrase κεφαλίδι βιβλίου is translated as 'scroll', 'roll of the book' or 'boekrol' in the various versions.

**Hebrews 10:7**

τότε εἶπον· ἰδοὺ ἤκω, ἐν κεφαλίδι βιβλίου γέγραπται περὶ ἐμοῦ, τοῦ ποιῆσαι ὃ θεὸς τὸ θέλημά σου:

(8a) 'So then I said, "Look, I've come to do your will, God. This has been written about me in the scroll"'. (CEB)

(8b) 'Then said I, Lo, I am come (In the roll of the book it is written of me) To do thy will, O God'. (ASV)

(8c) 'Toe het Ek gesê: Kyk, Ek kom - in die boekrol is dit van My geskrywe - om u wil te doen, o God' (Afr 53; Afr 83 also has 'boekrol'). 'Toen zei Ik: Hier ben Ik, Ik ben gekomen, God, om uw wil te doen, zoals er in de boekrol over Mij geschreven staat'. (W95)

Other examples of this meaning of βιβλίον are: Revelation 5:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9; 6:14; 10:8; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12; 21:27; 22:7, 9, 10, 18, 19.

Thirdly, Louw and Nida (1988 vol. 1:395, vol. 2:46) claim that the term βιβλίον may refer to the contents of a writing. This use is related to its abstract sense as 'a work of literature, science or reference' (Schniedewind 2013:48). Liddell and Scott (1940:315) refer to this usage as 'the division of a work' and 'the sacred books of Scripture'. Abbott-Smith (1937:81), Bauer *et al.* (1957:140) and Mounce (2012:839) do not mark this meaning as a separate usage, but combine it with the previous usage. As a representative verse, consider the translations of John 20:30 in (9):

**John 20:30**

Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἄλλα σημεῖα ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐνώπιον τῶν μαθητῶν [αὐτοῦ], ἃ οὐκ ἔστιν γεγραμμένα ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ:

(9a) 'Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll'. (CEB)

(9b) 'Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book'. (NET)

(9c) 'Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book'. (ASV)

(9d) 'Nog baie ander tekens het Jesus voor sy dissipels gedoen wat in hierdie boek nie beskrywe is nie'. (Afr 53; Afr 83)

(9e) 'Nog veel andere tekenen heeft Jezus voor de ogen van zijn leerlingen verricht, die niet in dit boek zijn neergeschreven'. (W95)

As mentioned previously, we view the translation of βιβλίον with 'book' for this usage as anachronistic, because the role of world view in cognition must be respected; something which is not existent cannot be used to express a metonymic concept. The translation of 'scroll' in (9a) is preferred. The translations of 'book' in (9b, c) or 'boek' in (9d, e) are problematic because they use the word 'book' (or 'boek') as a metonym for the contents of the document.

The examples in (10) and (11) are similar.

**John 21:25**

Ἔστιν δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ ἃ ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, ἅτινα ἐὰν γράφηται καθ' ἓν, οὐδ' αὐτὸν οἶμαι τὸν κόσμον χωρῆσαι τὰ γραφόμενα βιβλία:

(10a) 'Jesus did many other things as well. If all of them were recorded, I imagine the world itself wouldn't have enough room for the scrolls that would be written'. (CEB)

(10b) 'There are many other things that Jesus did. If every one of them were written down, I suppose the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written'. (NET)

(10c) 'And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written'. (ASV)

(10d) 'En daar is nog baie ander dinge wat Jesus alles gedoen het; maar as hulle een vir een beskrywe moes word, sou die wêreld self, dink ek, die geskrewe boeke nie bevat nie. Amen'. (Afr 53; Afr 83)

**Galatians 3:10**

Ὅσοι γὰρ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου εἰσίν, ὑπὸ κατάραν εἰσίν· γέγραπται γὰρ ὅτι ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ὃς οὐκ ἐμμένει πᾶσιν τοῖς γεγραμμένοις ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τοῦ νόμου τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτά:

(11a) 'All those who rely on the works of the Law are under a curse, because it is written, Everyone is cursed who does not keep on doing all the things that have been written in the Law scroll'. (CEB)

(11b) 'For as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one who continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law, to do them'. (ASV)

The Afrikaans 'boek van die wet' (Afr 53, Afr 83) is similar.



Because the translation of βιβλίον as 'book' is not appropriate, we suggest using 'scroll' in (9) to (11). Another strategy to translate it as a 'writing', 'work', 'document' or 'manuscript'. In (9), one could translate 'signs that are not described in this writing' (or 'work', 'document' or 'manuscript'). A third strategy is possible in some verses, namely, to leave βιβλίον untranslated. This is possible in (11): 'Everyone is cursed who does not keep on doing all the things that have been written in the Law'.

## βίβλος in the New Testament

The term βίβλος is used very similarly to the term βιβλίον. However, Abbott-Smith (1937:81) mentions that it is used much less frequent than βιβλίον, and with '... a connotation of sacredness and veneration' (so also Bauer *et al.* 1957:140 and Moulton & Milligin 1930:758). Mounce (2012:839) defines the term βίβλος as '... properly the inner bark or rind of the papyrus, which was anciently used instead of paper; hence, a written volume or roll, book, catalogue, account' (so also Friberg, Friberg & Miller 2000:4813; Liddell & Scott 1972:130; Schrenk 1964:615). Firstly, the term βίβλος refers to a record, which is defined as a relatively short statements in written form; 'written statements, certificate, notice, record' (Louw & Nida 1988 vol. 1:393–394, vol. 2:46). Matthew 1 is provided as a typical example with the following translations 'the birth record of Jesus Christ' or 'a list of the ancestors of Jesus Christ'.

### Matthew 1:1

Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυὶδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ:

(12a) 'A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham'. (CEB)

(12b) 'Die geslagsregister van Jesus Christus, die seun van Dawid, die seun van Abraham. (Afr 53)

(12c) 'The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham'. (ASV)

Note that the literal translation of 'book' in the ASV is anachronistic.

Secondly, the term βίβλος refers to an object consisting of sheets of parchment or of papyrus sewn together in the form of long scrolls or bound in the form of a book (Friberg *et al.* 2000:4813; Louw & Nida 1988 vol 1:61, vol 2:46). Acts 19:19 is used as a typical example:

### Acts 19:19

ἱκανοὶ δὲ τῶν τὰ περίεργα πραξάντων συνενέγκαντες τὰς βίβλους κατέκαιον ἐνώπιον πάντων, καὶ συνεψήφισαν τὰς τιμὰς αὐτῶν καὶ εὗρον ἄργυρίου μυριάδας πέντε:

(13a) 'This included a number of people who practiced sorcery. They collected their sorcery texts and burned them publicly. The value of those materials was calculated at more than someone might make if they worked for one hundred sixty-five years'. (CEB).

(13b) 'And not a few of them that practised magical arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all; and they

counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver'. (ASV)

The Afrikaans translation 'boek' (Afr 53; Afr 83) is similar.

Other examples are Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5; 20:15, 'the scroll of life' (CEB) versus 'the book of life' (ASV). Again, we prefer the culturally accurate translation 'scroll' for 'book' in all of these cases.

Thirdly, Louw and Nida (1988 vol. 1:395, vol. 2:46) claim that the term βίβλος refers to the content of a book: there is an intimate semantic relationship between letter, document, and book as physical objects and the contents of such writings (by contrast, Bauer *et al.* 1957:140–141 define the term βίβλος for both this and the previous usage in a single entry.) Friberg *et al.* (2000:4813) typifies this usage as 'metonymy of the content of a book' as in Luke 20:42 or as 'a written record' as in Matthew 1:1, which was treated under the first usage of βίβλος above. The same criticism applies in this case as for the same usage of βιβλίον – a metonymic relationship must be based upon a culturally accurate literal meaning. Luke 20:42 is provided as a typical example.

### Luke 20:42

αὐτὸς γὰρ Δαυὶδ λέγει ἐν βίβλῳ ψαλμῶν· εἶπεν κύριος τῷ κυρίῳ μου· κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου:

(14a) 'David himself says in the scroll of Psalms, The Lord said to my lord, "Sit at my right side"'. (CEB)

(14b) 'For David himself saith in the book of Psalms, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand'. (ASV)

(14c) 'Dawid sê tog self in die boek van die Psalms: Die Here het vir my Here gesê: Sit aan my regterhand'. (Afr 83; Afr 53)

The same pertains to Mark 12:26 'the scroll from Moses' (CEB) versus 'the book of Moses' (ASV); Luke 3:4 'the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet' (CEB) versus 'the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet' (ASV); Acts 1:20 'the Psalms scroll' versus 'the book of Psalms'; and Acts 7:42 'the scroll of the Prophets' (CEB) versus 'the book of the prophets' (ASV).

## Summary

We have seen that both words have the same range of meanings in the New Testament. In the first meaning, the words refer to a document or register. In the second meaning, the word refers to a physical document, which at the time of the New Testament was a scroll and not a book. Translations using 'book' are at best anachronistic and at worst confusing because a book cannot be rolled or unrolled. In the third meaning, the word refers metonymically to a long, coherent composition. In a source-text oriented translation in which the culture of the source text is preserved in the target text, the correct translation is 'scroll'. In a target-text oriented translation in which the culture of the source text is 'domesticated' for the target audience, it is best to translate using 'work', 'manuscript' or 'writing' rather than the anachronistic 'book'. In some contexts, it may be possible to leave the word untranslated.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the oral and written contexts of the Bible with respect to the arguments for orality adduced by Biblical Performance Criticism, on the one hand, and the arguments for written culture adduced by Hurtado, on the other. We have argued for a mediating position in which the oral and written co-exist in all phases of the media history of the Bible. We have further suggested that the oral-written interface of the Bible must take into account visuality at all stages as a permeating metatext. Finally, we examined the use of the terms βιβλίον and βιβλος in the New Testament. Except for the few cases where the reference is to a register or document, we argued that these terms are best translated as 'scroll' in order to maintain the cultural background of a scroll rather than a codex (book) in New Testament times. This translation strategy avoids the anachronistic use of 'book', especially in contexts in which the New Testament writers depict the rolling or unrolling of the βιβλίον as well as contexts in which the term is used metonymically to refer to the contents of the document.

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## Authors' contributions

J.A.N. and C.L.M.N. jointly conceptualised, researched and wrote the article.

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