

“By the Letter?/Word for Word? Scriptural Citation in Paul”

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Answer and Questions

The answer is fairly straightforward: In his letters, Paul sometimes cited Scripture from memory rather than from a written source. Far less straightforward is the question to which this is the answer. Is it (simply): Did Paul sometimes cite Scripture from memory? Or: Did Paul have the requisite training to have committed to memory large portions of Scripture? Or: Are there reasons to think that Paul lacked easy access to written Scripture when composing his letters? Or: Does Paul’s citation of Scripture from memory help explain apparent inconsistencies or downright mistakes he made? Or: Does Paul’s citation of Scripture from memory help explain many unusual, but apt, connections he made between and among passages?

And, yes, the number of questions being asked could be considerably expanded, although in general those posing such questions fall into two categories: those who think Paul cited from memory—and this was a considerable part of his artistry; and those who think Paul cited from memory—and this was a practice he should have avoided. Of course, I am leaving out, for the moment, a third category (to which we will return); namely, those who don’t think that Paul ever (or only very rarely) relied on his memory for scriptural citations, instead consistently making use of written sources.

Memorization as Part of Paul’s Education

It is universally recognized and acknowledged that memorization played a substantial role in Greco-Roman pedagogy.¹ It represented an essential part of the upbringing of any child who could be described as educated, and it was considered indispensable for many of the more prominent professions. This largely held true throughout the periods of classical Greece, Hellenism, republican Rome and the early centuries of the monarchy.²

¹ This is amply demonstrated in a variety of sources, from the oft-cited Henri Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Sheed and Ward, 1956) to the recently published Mary Carruthers, “How to Make a Composition: Memory-Craft in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages,” in *Memory: History, Theories, Debates* (ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 15-29, to which we will return below.

² See more broadly the relevant chapters in the following collections: Jocelyn Penny Small, ed., *Wax Tablets of the Mind: Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy in Classical Antiquity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); E. Anne Mackay, ed.,

If, as some believe, the majority of Paul's education took place in the Diaspora, say in Tarsus, he would certainly have been exposed at an early age to the necessity of memorizing large sections of literary works.³ It is not clear whether that would have included Homer, Athenian tragedies, and/or works of philosophy. Given the fact that Paul shows himself to be thoroughly familiar with the "Old Testament" in Greek, we are relatively safe in picturing the LXX (here we use this term broadly to refer to any "Scriptural" passage in Greek) as a central text in Paul's studies—and in imagining his growing confidence in the oral recitation of larger and larger portions of this sacred text.

Examples of prodigious feats of memory from antiquity abound: the sophist Hippias, late fifth century BCE, who could repeat fifty names after hearing them only once; L. Scipio, early 2nd century BCE consul of Rome, who had memorized the names of the entire Roman people (estimated to be almost a quarter of a million in number); and Charmadas, second half of the second century BCE, who could recite by heart any book in the "libraries."⁴ Some of these are more relevant to Paul's circumstances than others. However, the preponderance of evidence is clearly on the side of those who express confidence that memorizing a text of the length of the LXX was not outside of the realm of possibility for a Jew who received a classically conceived education.

But what if the context of Paul's education was primarily Judaeian, specifically among the Pharisees? We must admit that, under such circumstances, it is less clear that Paul would have begun memorization in Greek at an early age, although it is probable that learning by memory was as much a feature of Pharisaic pedagogy as it was elsewhere. Here we can point, if only tentatively, to evidence of an admittedly later period in Judaism⁵ and, for that matter, also in Christianity: according to Augustine, Antony remembered Scripture in spite of his being illiterate; Eusebius mentions a blind Egyptian who was said to have known whole books of Scripture by heart; and Jerome wrote to a correspondent that "he should make himself into a library for Christ."⁶ Do the examples we bring forward constitute new developments or are they part of a long, presumably evolving process that could easily date back a few centuries? I am comfortable with the latter notion, while at the same time fully cognizant of the shortcomings that arise if we uncritically read rabbinic or early Christian phenomena back into a preceding age.

Orality, Literacy, Memory in the Ancient Greek and Roman World (Leiden: Brill, 2007); and Stephen C. Barton et al., eds., *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity* (Tü

³ On this, see most recently E. P. Sanders, "Paul between Judaism and Hellenism," in *St. Paul Among the Philosophers* (ed. John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 74-89, esp. 77-82.

⁴ For these examples, see William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 31-32.

⁵ See the important work of Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE – 400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

⁶ These examples are taken from Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 301, and Carruthers, "How to Make a Composition," 16-17.

Availability and Accessibility of Written Materials

In almost every discussion of Paul's travels and writings, we are presented with a picture—against which, by the way, I don't intend to mount a frontal challenge—of how difficult it would have been for Paul to travel with scrolls containing Greek Scripture.⁷ Some have calculated the weight and girth of such material, although there are undoubtedly many uncertainties in arriving at specifics in this regard. I prefer to think in terms of the dimensions of a modern Torah scroll, such as can be found in any synagogue today. And, of course, multiple scrolls would have been needed to transcribe or translate the entire Hebrew Bible.

The analogy of a contemporary Torah scroll also comes into play when we consider what it must have been like to look up a specific passage in any “biblical” scroll in antiquity. Just as is the case with today's Torah scroll, the text is essentially continuous without chapter and verse notations of the sort we rely on when citing Scripture. I don't know that we can fully appreciate the difficulties someone like Paul would have had (although he may have had assistants to do some of the “dirty work”), but I have seen, and been involved in, what happens in a synagogue with only a single scroll when it is necessary to move from one passage to another that is in a different book or section: a lot of effort is expended in rolling and unrolling, squinting and straining eyes to find precisely the wording that is being sought.

But perhaps Paul and his contemporaries had the equivalent of bookmarks or section dividers. Maybe there were individuals trained to do just this sort of work. Or it is just possible that the seemingly tedious labor of looking up passages in scrolls was understood as part of the work entailed in writing letters such as Paul's or preparing sermons on similar topics. Surely, much that was time-consuming, but necessary in research only a few years ago would be considered unthinkable by this new generation of scholars.

It is possible, however, that Paul's (supposed) procedure of regularly consulting a written text does not depend on his actually carrying such a text with him. Instead, he may have availed himself of the opportunities that arose when he visited synagogues during his travels. For this to be a viable option, we would have to determine whether Greek “Bible” scrolls were an expected feature of ancient (Diaspora) synagogues and, in addition, whether Paul would have been granted access to such scrolls if synagogues did indeed house them. So far as I know, neither of these propositions can be easily affirmed, although I suppose that, at some level, they can also not be completely dismissed. Thus, Paul may have consulted written texts of Scriptures at synagogues (and also at other locations?) during his travel and, on the basis of such contacts, may have drawn the wording of passages that he would include in his letters.

⁷ See, among others, Wagner, J. Ross, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul “In Concert” in the Letter to the Romans* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 101; Brill: Leiden, 2002), 20.

This last sentence points in the direction of another “written” resource of which Paul may have availed himself; namely, lists of Scripture passages prepared by him and/or by others. The existence of these lists, which characteristically bring together passages on similar themes or with similar wording, was often posited by scholars on the basis of later practice. With the discovery within the Dead Sea Scrolls of catena texts, this very practice can be brought into the chronological and perhaps theological context of Paul.⁸ By their very nature, Paul’s reliance of such lists, whether he or another produced them, would account for the many places where Paul’s letters contain a series of passages, drawn from disparate sections of the Bible but linked thematically or linguistically. (As we will note below, this same phenomenon can also be accounted for by Paul’s reliance on memory.)

There is, then, much to be said for the role of written lists in Paul’s citation of Scripture. We are still left with trying to determine whether Paul made use of existing lists or compiled such lists when he happened to have access to the full, written text of Scripture.⁹ Or, perhaps, he commissioned the making of lists as the occasion arose during his travels and letter writing. All of these are possible, but they would seem to limit the spontaneity of Paul’s written communications with his churches if he needed to stop until he received a list or shift his arguments to take advantage of lists he had already prepared.

The “Problem” with Paul’s Citations

To a certain extent, the “oral option” (as I will call it) arose to explain the fact that, while many of Paul’s Scriptural citations accord verbatim with known Greek versions (either “the LXX” or one of its revisions), not all of them do.¹⁰ To help explain such discrepancies, it was useful, if also convenient, to assert that they are the result of Paul’s reliance on his memory, which (like that of everyone else) is far from perfect.

There are many problems with structuring the “problem” in this way. For those of a certain religious sensibility, it would be theologically imprudent (or even impudent) to suggest that the letters of Paul, as part of Sacred Writ, contain errors. Surely, Paul was divinely inspired—and it is this inspiration, rather than the mechanics of citation, that must always be borne in mind.

⁸ On this, see Wagner, *Heralds*, 21.

⁹ For the suggestion that Paul himself took notes when reading Scripture, see Christopher D. Stanley, *Paul and the Language of Scripture: Citation Technique in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ For a summation of these issues, from the mid-20th century, see E. Earle Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957).

I have respect for such a view, but it can hardly be allowed to limit the perspective from which we view this issue. In this regard, we can note that, with the discovery and publication of more and more Greek texts, more and more variations appear. Although some continue to picture an “accepted” Greek text in the first century (parallel to the MT, which would develop a generation or two later), there is little, if any reason to assert that Paul or any of his contemporaries would have looked askance at some “LXX” text as being inferior or in error, vis-à-vis some universally recognized exemplar. Thus, it is necessary for us to reckon with the probability that Paul had access to a wider variety of Greek “biblical” texts than is usually imagined and that some of the differences between Paul’s Scripture and known LXX texts result from his use of written material that has not survived.

Brief Excursus: At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, contacts between LXX and NT scholars were close, especially in centers such as Oxford and Cambridge. Sometimes, one and the same scholar worked in both “fields.”¹¹ As a result of a number of factors (including, I suppose, the continuous process of academic specialization), contacts between specialists in the LXX and NT decreased in number and in (if I may use this term) intensity during the decades that followed.¹² If I am correct in my observations, the past two decades or so have seen the re-establishment of fruitful interaction, a process that we should, in my view, encourage in all ways possible.¹³

Moreover, where Paul and the “LXX” are seen to diverge and reliance on memory is given as the reason, no pattern can be easily, if at all, discerned. By this, I mean that we might suspect that findings from “memory studies” could be brought to bear, so that, if we do suspect (unconscious) changes by Paul, we could identify what types of changes would be most likely. Instead, at least on the basis of my research, Paul’s reliance on memory results in an exceedingly wide array of variations, none of which need strike an observer as distinctively dependent on memory. Here are a few examples: 1 Corinthians 9:9, with respect to the (nearly) synonymous terms *phimoseis* and *kemoseis*;¹⁴ 2

¹¹ As an example from this “golden period,” see Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, revised by Richard Rusden Ottley (New York: Ktav 1968 [reprint; first printed, Cambridge University Press, 1902]), especially Part III, Chapter 2, “Quotations from the Septuagint in the New Testament” (pp. 381-405).

¹² In my view, this is immediately evident from the rather cursory discussion in Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint in Modern Study* (Ann Arbor: Eisenbrauns, 1978 [reprint; first printed, Oxford University Press, 1968]), which is contained in part 6 of chapter XI, “The Current Septuagint in Septuagint Studies” (pp. 353-358).

¹³ See, for example, the generous analysis in Natalio Fernández Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible* (tr. W.G.E. Watson; Leiden: Brill, 2000).

¹⁴ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, “1 Corinthians,” in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 720: “Assuming that Paul used the synonym [*phimoseis*] rather

Corinthians 9:9 (with reference to Prov 22:8), where LXX has “*eulogei*” (“blesses”) root and Paul uses “*agapa*” (“loves”);¹⁵ and Romans 11:2ff (in comparison with LXX 3 Reigns 19:14ff).¹⁶

“Creative” Paul and the “Memory” Solution

Increasingly, NT researchers have come to recognize that some of the differences between the language of known “LXX” passages and that found in Paul are the result of creative and conscious efforts made by Paul himself. It is not the case, as was once argued, that Paul is unaware of the original “Scriptural” (Old Testament) context of a passage, but that for Paul it is the new, “Christian” context that matters. While researchers used to “blame” Paul’s “faulty” memory for his failure to keep his citations “properly” contextualized, they are now able to recognize the role played by Paul’s memory in his recontextualizing, and often re-wording, of passages.

For it has been demonstrated that in antiquity individuals constructed mnemonic devices, as diverse as palaces and flora, which consisted of rooms or appendages into which they could place passages with similar themes or other correspondences.

Much valued was the ability of orators or writers to draw upon their memories, thus configured, to devise clever and apt collections of passages from the most disparate sources. The visualization of memorized material into appropriate rooms, etc., was indispensable in this process of retrieval and reconstitution.¹⁷

Paul could have achieved the same (or at least very similar) results by using written lists. However, as I suggested above, unless Paul had an almost unlimited number of such lists or had prepared beforehand for the details of the letters he would be writing to a particular community or on a particular set of travels, reliance on written lists would probably limit the topics he could cover and would certainly constrain the spontaneity

than the word found in the LXX [*kemoseis*], we may conclude that probably he was quoting from memory (or either the Greek or the Hebrew text [Deut 25:4]).”

¹⁵ Peter Balla, “2 Corinthians,” in Beale-Carson, *Commentary*, 778: “It may be that he [Paul] is quoting from memory, or perhaps from a version of the Greek text different from that of the LXX” (Balla is quoting here from Thrall).

It is also worth noting that these two examples—one each from 1 and 2 Corinthians—are the only ones I could locate in Beale-Carson, *Commentary*, for which there is the suggestion that Paul may have relied on his memory.

¹⁶ Swete, *Introduction*, 401, who cites this as a case where “a wide departure from the LXX. is probably to be explained by the supposition that the Apostle quotes from memory.”

¹⁷ For this, see Carruthers, “How to Make a Composition,” 20-22.

with which he could respond to fast-moving developments in the communities with which he corresponded.

It is also becoming clear that ancient audiences were equipped to receive both “exact” quotations and possibly periphrastic citations and that they might be expected to distinguish between the two.¹⁸ In the case of Paul, this naturally raises the question of the sophistication or background of his intended audience. To me, it is doubtless Paul’s calculation that references to Scripture would be meaningful, perhaps even persuasive, to his audience. Of course, he may have miscalculated the make-up of his audience. At the same time, his audience would change, since it is difficult to imagine that his letters, once in a community, were quickly consigned to the dustbin. Rather, they would have become objects of discussion and debate, if not veneration.¹⁹

And with this renewed attention, it is likely that increased consideration was paid to Paul’s use of Scripture. So far as I know, no objection is recorded along the lines that Paul “misquoted” Scripture. Rather, his audience understood, or came to understand, the points he was making by use of Scripture. It does not seem to have mattered whether it accorded precisely with the way in which such texts were read (chanted?) in a given church.

In fact, we can posit that Paul’s “creative” use of Scripture increased the fluidity of the Greek text as it was transmitted in the early Church. Although “textual fluidity” is most often associated with the status of the Hebrew text prior to the preeminence of the MT, I believe (as alluded to above) that similar fluidity obtained for quite some time in Greek-speaking churches (and continues, if I understand correctly, in the Orthodox churches of today). A citation by Paul, whether derived from written sources or through the creative use of his memory, could easily have become *the* biblical text for a given community or in a given context.

Paul and Memory

No one, so far as I know, doubts that Paul read and knew well Scripture in the Greek language. So far as I am concerned, there is no reason to suspect that he did not also know Scripture in Hebrew. His choice, to regularly use an existing text in Greek rather than make his own translation from the Hebrew (which he probably did on occasion), may have been determined by existing practice in the churches with which he was in communication, Paul’s recognition of the general suitability of the existing translation, or any number of other factors.

But Paul’s reliance on an existing text in Greek was the starting, not the ending point for his citation of Scripture. Whether or not we wish to allow for inadvertent “mistakes” on Paul’s part, it should now be clear that we must allow for Paul’s re-wording of an earlier

¹⁸ Carruthers, “How to Make a Composition,” 20.

¹⁹ On this, see Wagner, *Heralds*, 36-39.

text on the basis of the experience of Jesus' life and death. Is this procedure more likely to have occurred through Paul's immediate use of written sources (whether full text or abstracts), through the practice and application of memory, or a combination of these two and perhaps others?

My research in a number of areas leads me to be leery of "either-or" solutions. Thus, for example, I am unconvinced by arguments that the origins of the Septuagint must be located in either royal initiative (on the part of Ptolemy II and/or his librarian) or the needs of the Alexandrian community, for whom fluency in Hebrew was fast becoming a rarity. Rather, it was a confluence of interests, both internal and external to the Jewish community, that led to the Greek translation.²⁰

And, in my view, a similar multiplicity of approaches or resources should be envisioned for Paul.²¹ As I see it, he was at home in researching "biblical" scrolls, with all of the inconveniences and labors such an approach entailed. And he was comfortable with using lists either specially prepared by/for him or those he came upon readymade. And he not only knew the Greek text (or large parts of it) by memory, but he had also catalogued it, placing similar passages side by side in his "memory bank" in such a way that he could easily "withdraw" passages that had been "deposited" near each other.

I am particularly drawn to this last approach of Paul's, not to the exclusion of the others, but because it fits in with the picture of a man who, armed with vast intellectual and theological resources, stepped down from any (and every) possible ivory tower into the realities, as messy as they were, of the world he inhabited. That world didn't always stop, any more than ours does, to allow the individual the "leisure" of going back (literally) to the sources. The measure of this man was, to a large degree, dependent on what he could recall at the moment, in the midst. And for this purpose, Paul's memory was well suited and well used.

Additional Observation:

I am among a group, perhaps (probably?) a very small group, who believes that we can learn from the (more) modern world, where documentation is often quite full, about practices and procedures in antiquity, where documentation is often quite sparse or even non-existent.²² It is certainly the case that due consideration must be taken of changed

²⁰ See now Leonard Greenspoon, "At the Beginning: The Septuagint as a Jewish Bible Translation," in *"Translation Is Required": The Septuagint in Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. Robert J. V. Hiebert; Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 159-169.

²¹ See Wagner, *Heralds*, 25-26, and the two examples from antiquity (2 Macc 2:25 and Augustine, *De Doctrina Christianana* 2:30-31) he cites (pp. 26-27).

²² See Leonard Greenspoon, "Biblical Translators in Antiquity and in the Modern World: A Comparative Study," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 60 (1989), 91-113; and Greenspoon, "At the Beginning."

circumstances. This is particularly true when it comes to questions related to memory, reliance of memory, citation by memory, etc.

When appropriate caution is exercised, is there anything of value to be learned from modern experiences? My answer is in the affirmative, and, I feel, it is not my answer alone. Several major researchers in this area provide autobiographical accounts related to memory. Allow me to cite two of them: Sanders recalls, to the exact date (April 18, 1947), an (unintentionally?) dispiriting remark from one of his teachers, to the effect that “we do not need to memorize.”²³ And Wagner relates that “when I recite the psalm [Psalm 23] for my four-year-old, I purposefully modernize the language in order to communicate the meaning of the psalm in terms he can understand.”²⁴

Even where these modern examples part company with the ancient exemplars, or perhaps exactly where they part company, we can recognize both our proximity to those who came thousands of years before us and the distance that separates us. My preference is to emphasize the former, while not neglecting the latter.

²³ Sanders, “Paul,” 78.

²⁴ Wagner, *Heralds*, 23 fn. 83.