



Toward understanding the New Testament as oral literature

A successful classroom teaching tactic that can be replicated by other instructors

Andrew B. Irvine

Maryville College

The context: I use this tactic in an early class in “New Testament World and Culture.” Class size is usually 26–30 students, mostly in their first year of college.

The pedagogical purpose: Whether or not they are already acquainted with the New Testament, students typically understand it as a *written text*, and confer on it many associated prejudices of modern literacy, not least the notion that written texts are neutral repositories of (presumably factual) information. The tactic is intended to call this prejudice into question by involving students in an experience of a New Testament text as oral performance.

Description of the strategy: I begin the class by borrowing a book – any book – from a student and make a production of commenting on what a curious device it is. In examining the device – its cover, title page, etc. – we start to recognize how prominent the concept of the author must be. When we discover the copyright page (and especially if it includes the author’s assertion of ownership of intellectual property), we can broach the topic of the author as the authorizing source – as presumed guarantor of factuality – of the text.

The situation is different with respect to the New Testament writings, and I project the first page of the Gospel of Mark in the 4th century Codex Sinaiticus to illustrate this. I ask students to say what stands out to them about this text. Usually very quickly, we have a list of observations including the virtual absence of punctuation, spacing between words, and lower case letters.

I then distribute an English translation version of the prologue of the Gospel of Mark, mimicking the features of the Codex Sinaiticus, and ask a student to read it aloud to the class. The reader typically stumbles through the text, and others in the class try to help. This experience launches a discussion about how “reading with one’s ears” must have required first century readers to make decisions about the sense of the text – to be “authors” and “authorities” – in a way that does not arise when we read with our eyes heavily punctuated modern texts. Indeed, every performance is a new text in some measure, so scriptural authority turns out to depend not so much on some original source as on subsequent performance.

Why it is effective: I’ve used this tactic for about 10 years and it has never failed to generate effective discussion of the inappropriate imposition of modern literate assumptions about ancient texts and the basis of their authority for their audiences. By extension, the tactic might be fruitfully employed in teaching any “scriptures” that assumed their authority as forms of oral literature.

How to cite this article: Irvine AB. Toward understanding the New Testament as oral literature. *Teach Theol Relig.* 2018;21:211–211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12443>