

BOOK REVIEWS

VAN VEEN, Ben F. 2024. *Oral Performance and the Veil of Text: Detextification, Paul's Letters, and the Test Case of Galatians 2–3*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick. Pp. 308. ISBN 9781666762969, Hardback \$59. ISBN 9781666762952, Paperback \$39.

Distinguishing between the task of a historian of antiquity and that of a modern reader may at first glance appear quite simple. Yet an uncritical bifurcation overlooks some of the transactional complexities, similarities, and assumptions which govern each approach. Modern interpretative methods that determine notions of text, the concept of “meaning”, etc., inform the work of historians, which in turn inform modern readers. When left under-scrutinized, these relationships can become muddled and lead to a host of problems when conceptualizing history and what it is that modern biblical scholars actually do. Such muddling is evident across a number of arenas within biblical studies, but, in particular, it can be observed in the ways in which so-called historical approaches attempt to determine “meaning” within Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Ben F. van Veen’s *Oral Performance and the Veil of Text* steps into this messy intersection of methods, interpretation, media, and conceptions of the object of study within Pauline studies, in hopes of providing a disentangled and “detextified” way forward.

Van Veen’s introduction is comprised of a somewhat peculiar configuration of twenty-seven sections: four cautions to the reader, two hypotheses, a handful of helpful recaps, and a number of subheadings which attempt to make sense of the complex thought processes at play — the logic of which, admittedly, is not always immediately clear to this reader. More optimistically, from the outset, the reader gets but a taste of the breadth of ideas with which van Veen will interact. Operative terms like “text”, “history”, “reader”, “reading”, “text and context”, “subject-object”, and “communicative act” are all open for reevaluation as van Veen seeks to get to the heart of the “media muddle” within the study of Paul’s letters, something that plagues biblical studies more broadly as well. For example, in the case of Paul’s letters, it is widely agreed that most of them were written for the purpose of being read aloud within a communal setting — and, therefore, aurally experienced by an ancient audience. Some of Paul’s

letters explicitly attest to this intended modality (see 1 Thessalonians 5:27 and Colossians 4:16). Yet the paradigm often utilized by modern interpreters is that of a text written for and read by an individual reader. This “media muddling” is what Thomas Boomershine has referred to as “media eisegesis”.

Among a host of interesting insights covered and alluded to in van Veen’s introduction, two key ideas help frame the following assessment. First, he identifies the purpose of the volume as “clarify[ing] the relation between our roles as historians *and* as readers” (5; emphasis added). Whether this relationship is clarified by the end of the work, I remain uncertain, but along the way it is certainly complicated in a number of edifying and useful ways. Second, van Veen introduces and defines his helpful neologism “detextification”. At risk of oversimplification, detextification is an attempt to distinguish between the experience of the oral performance of a text “there-and-then-to-them”, from a reading the text “here-and-now-to-us” (34–36). As Paul’s letters have become text to us today, we must “detext” them before we can conceptualize what they “did” or “how” they meant to ancient audiences. The performance event must be what shapes our understanding of how a text makes meaning, and the letters themselves, as objects, are only a piece of the ancient communication process. The idea of “detextification” is intriguing and the approach to Paul’s letter to the Galatians (in Chapter 4) could be helpful to those already interested in performance and orality. Whether or not the term is helpful, concepts which underlie this neologism will undoubtedly be useful to scholars attempting to disentangle the media muddle that exists within biblical scholarship. In hindsight, van Veen’s opening salvo is perhaps best approached by readers as a journey through a corn maze or a hike through wooded and unkept trails. Getting lost is inevitable, and yet those moments of finding oneself lost are part of what makes the experience unique and worthwhile. Once van Veen gets us to the end of the maze it becomes easier to appreciate his approach and the circuitous route he takes.

Following this insightful yet eccentric introduction, the book settles into more generic expectations. The first two chapters are traditional *status* chapters, mapping the trajectory of discussions on oral traditions (Chapter 1) and Pauline scholarship related to oral performance (Chapter 2). Readers familiar with the literature on oral traditions will find familiar voices (Milman Parry, A.B. Lord, John Miles Foley, Eric Havelock, and Walter Ong) with little new ground covered in Chapter 1. As for Chapter 2, the longest chapter, van Veen’s framing of the question(s) of orality within Pauline studies and the limitations of past investigations is helpful. Those

familiar with Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) may be surprised by the omission of more recent works and some of the nuances that arise from the second wave of performance critics (what Peter Perry refers to as BPC 2.0). Admittedly, much of this newer work focuses on texts other than Pauline literature, which may explain and justify its omission. In the end, both chapters accomplish their goal of contextualizing what follows within broader conversations of orality and Pauline studies while also identifying gaps with which van Veen will attempt to attend to moving forward.

Chapter 3 is arguably the most important of the book. Here, van Veen introduces two interrelated yet distinctive movements which contribute to “detextification”: *textualizing history* and *historizing text* (italics original). Van Veen correctly critiques the typical reading mindset of modern biblical scholars, specifically the inability to get at the oral mindset with which ancient authors would have composed and in which ancient audiences would have heard or experienced the text. While such a critique is not new, the contribution here comes by way of van Veen’s construction of the problem. Standing on the shoulders of Paul Ricoeur and John Miles Foley, van Veen notes the theoretical and practical limitations of historical and literary approaches for conceptualizing the function (the “how”) of texts in antiquity. He begins with a critique of the overly simplistic notions of “text” and “context” and notes how texts “represent” but do not necessarily convey “presence”. What this demonstrates is that the text, to some degree, is a veil to original communication events and not the event itself. A text has a history beyond that of the “letter” of the text, and concrete communication acts lie beyond our historicizing of the text, yet both require, at least to some degree, an abstract (re)construction to conceptualize the process — both of production and eventual product. Such abstractions are not only problematic from a historical perspective but are limited in their ability to configure the communicative event *in toto*. Once again, at the risk of oversimplifying, modern readers are missing fundamental pieces of that communicative act. The full complexity of such communication events are rarely considered by the historian and are often unconsciously determined by the interpreter, and yet the (re)constructions of both often determine the way(s) the communicative act functions.

Using Galatians 2:19–20 and 3:10–12 as a test case, in Chapter 4, van Veen helpfully problematizes some of the ways in which past interpreters of Paul blur the lines between the task of historians and the interpretive interests of modern readers. Paul’s rhetorical engagement with his opponents, when approached historically and limited to the “text” of Galatians, leads to an abstracted “context” or historical situation in which

Paul is writing rather than a concrete and real-world communication act. Specifically, van Veen notes that this abstraction has a tendency to overlook or misunderstand the role of baptism in Paul's rhetoric and how this rhetoric "functions" against his opponents and for his listening audience in a hearing of this text. Whether or not van Veen's conclusions are persuasive or not in this regard, I will leave for Pauline experts and individual readers. Regardless, the process of "detextification" and the theoretical framing demonstrated here, specifically the importance of conceptualizing the role of the letter beyond the text — a demonstration of the value of thinking about first-century texts apart from text and as a piece of an oral communication act — is a fascinating example of the importance of (re-)imaging and (re-)considering the entirety of oral events in which early audiences experienced early Christian texts.

At its core, *Oral Performance and the Veil of the Text* provides theoretical depth, helpful terminology, and necessary nuance to the scholarly arenas of orality studies and (at least to a degree) BPC — fields that have historically, and at times rightfully so, been criticized for lacking such sophistication. While many of the independent ideas found therein are not necessarily novel, van Veen's particular construction and his careful (re-)naming of a number of complex phenomena provides a helpful framework for thinking about the "media muddle" and what is "actually" going on when historians and readers engage with biblical texts. In this regard, *Oral Performance and the Veil of Text* succeeds in complicating the relationship between historian and reader, and as such is a volume that will be worth engaging for some time.

In terms of the functional aspects of a book review, I would be remiss if I did not highlight some of the limitations of *Oral Performance and the Veil of Text*. There are certainly a number of conceptual areas where I am left with more questions than answers, as is expected from such a theoretically dense book dealing with ancient performances. As I think about the purpose of this review for potential readers, however, it is the practical limitations that are more glaring.

First, and somewhat ironically, this book about "detextification" of the Pauline literature could have been aided by a little more consideration of how modern readers engage with texts. As stated in the forward by Arie Zwiep, "[t]his book is no easy reading" (viii). I agree. I found *Oral Performance and the Veil of Text* to be conceptually fascinating and thought provoking, and it kept me returning to its pages wanting more; as for its prose, I couldn't wait for the experience to end. Despite being well versed in the technical language of most arenas in which van Veen seeks

to find footing, I found the prose largely impenetrable. A single reading is likely insufficient to probe the depths of the ideas covered by van Veen, but because of its density I am not inclined to return. Certain readers might find this density appealing, and others may write this off as necessary for the field; I suspect most readers will share my experience and judge the style an unnecessary detraction. In fairness, van Veen does a sufficient job of summarizing material, especially in the conclusion of the book, as well as in recapitulations scattered throughout — these are worth returning to. However, the lack of foregrounding, the circuitous development of arguments, and the clunky prose made for an especially difficult read, even for a well-primed audience.

Second, at risk of redundancy, the book reads like a dissertation. This is not intended as a criticism, rather more simply an observation about the differences between the two genres. There are a number of valuable insights buried in extensive footnotes, several of which likely deserve a more prominent position in the body of the text. Additionally, there are excurses and asides throughout the body that detract from the main argument and may be better suited to appendices. The result is that, at times, the logic of the book was extremely difficult to follow and often I felt it unnecessarily so.

I mention these limitations here not only for the sake of potential readers, but also because they connect to a larger issue within BPC: the lack of clearly defined and easily transferable methods. As it stands, BPC is not a widely applied or widely accepted approach to biblical interpretation. Part of this is due to early criticisms (noted by van Veen in Chapter 2) and to the focus on theory that has consumed a great deal of the second wave of scholars. Until BPC becomes more palatable and accessible for broader usage, until it is able to simplify some of this complexity, it will likely remain on the fringes of the guild. While assessing such editorial decisions in a book review is admittedly subjective, I fear such barriers in *Oral Performance and the Veil of Text* will limit the long-term impact of this volume. This is unfortunate, as I believe there are a number of helpful ideas buried in this volume, many of which deserve and could serve a larger audience.

Stylistic and editorial preferences aside, *Oral Performance and the Veil of the Text* is worth the struggle for those already working in the orality and performance spheres. Continuing to problematize notions of “text”, the anachronistic media assumptions of modern interpreters of ancient texts, the uncritical conflation of history and interpretation, and several similar concepts will undoubtedly be helpful to those thinking about the

media muddle in biblical studies. “Detextification” and its partners “there-and-then-to-them” and “here-and-now-to-us” could prove to be valuable terms for those seeking to more readily express the object of study, as well as distinguish the media assumptions between antiquity and the present. I learned a great deal from this work and I will continue to learn from it upon additional readings; I’m just not sure that will be anytime soon.

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Works Cited

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