

## **An Exhibition in Art: The Bible's 'Chapter' and 'Verse' are under Threat!**

**Rev Dr David G Palmer, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2015**

### **Introduction:**

The church properly celebrated the day of the 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta; the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1215 had been much involved. The same Stephen Langton also was the scholar who introduced 'chapters' into the texts of the books of the Bible. It is likely that he made these divisions between 1204 and 1205 before he became Archbishop. In 1226, with the publication of the edition of the Vulgate known as the Paris Bible, they were introduced to the 'world'. At that time, chapters were subdivided into seven portions each, marked in the margins by a,b,c,d,e,f and g. In time, these were altered to the numbered 'verses' that we use today.

In the 800 years since Langton, no serious challenge to the 'chapter' has been made. But now, in regard to the New Testament at least, I challenge the *status quo*. As a Researcher, Methodist Minister and Architect, I have amassed evidence over thirty-three years which demonstrates that all twenty-seven texts of the New Testament are *self-referencing*. I present this evidence in the form of artworks in a two-year Touring Exhibition. (**This collection of ten artworks is currently on display till the end of June at West Street Methodist Church, Swadlincote, South Derbyshire, from 10.00 till 4.00.**) Chapters and verses have been needed in the past, as, indeed, right up to the present, but they've only ever been needed because academia and the church have failed to understand the New Testament texts, for what they are, and for what they do for the reader!

### **The Issue before us:**

The church doesn't read the texts today in the manner that the writers intended. One obstacle is the Sunday lectionary system of reading. I've looked, for example, at the references to the First Epistle of John: over the three year cycle, not one suggested reading

begins and ends where the writer would have wished it to. Begin a reading halfway through one piece of a text and end it halfway through the next and any preacher will make anything of it! It's haphazard reading! So also, in commentaries, teaching courses and reading schemes, subdivisions are imposed on texts by people who do not know that every text has its own significant sub-divisions already. This mix-up leads to every kind of failure in biblical exposition, exegesis and hermeneutics (the ways that professors, scholars, lecturers, teachers and preachers share *their own* interpretations of the meanings of 'readings'). A purely literary analysis of the Greek texts in their first century context is all that we have ever needed. But no one has bothered him/herself to do this and the reason for this may be because we have all been misled.

In every generation, mainstream scholarship has maintained that, though the New Testament writers wrote in Greek, they didn't write to the rules of Classical Greek. 'Their comparative indifference to *pagan literature* was on the whole an advantage to the writers of the New Testament. They gained thereby in freshness and freedom from *stale conventions* and *artificial rhetoric*. They were *not conscious literary artists, obeying a convention* and *imitating the correct models*, like Hellenistic authors...' This was written by Rev J.N. Sanders, Dean of Peterhouse College, Cambridge, in an Essay of 1962 on 'the Literature and Canon of the New Testament', for Peake's single volume Bible Commentary. Comments of this kind, in works like this, well represent the learning of earlier generations. At the same time they 'groom' future scholars: 'Don't look to the Ancient Greeks for help!' Sanders is not to be blamed for this. He was in the mainstream of scholarly opinion and firmly in the midst of the currents and consensuses of his era. (In every generation, it is where many drown.) But oh, what grief: the outcome! The very place we should have gone for help was the place we were told not to go!

My travelling 'Exhibition in Art' puts the case emphatically. In ten artworks which illustrate over 75% of the New Testament, it shows that the writers *were* rhetors, writers who *were conscious literary artists, who obeyed a convention* and *imitated the correct models, like Hellenistic authors*. Indeed, if these New Testament writings had not been written to the rules of ancient rhetoric, I ask, would they have been read, respected, remembered and repeated in the first centuries of the life of the church? And if they hadn't been read, respected, etc, would there have been a world faith today called Christianity? It seems to

me that the early church was absolutely right to employ the best writing skills that were available to it then. It is what we do today, isn't it?

It is because these books were written in a disciplined manner that we can be rid of Langton's 'chapters'. The writers employed repeated use of the same writing style from the very beginning of a document to its very end. It is the first thing a reader would look for when handed a new text. In John's Gospel, the reader would find, 'In the beginning was the word; and the word was with God; and the word was God.' As a result, the reader would recognise the writing style that the rhetor had chosen for the whole of the text as the three-part writing style, ABB' where A is the introductory piece, B is the first development and B' is the second and balancing development. It might be said to compare with the dactyl of Homer's usage.

The writers also presented their material to a simple structure that the reader would be able to discern with help. In the Revelation to John, the help that is given is in the repetitions of numbers and phrases. That no one has bothered themselves enough to spend time exploring the Greek texts is beyond my understanding! It's shocking to think that over all these years neither the church nor its scholars have known that the Book of Revelation is simply structured to a scheme of seven series of 'sevens' in chiasm (1,2,3,3,2,1'). Simple Greek repetitions of 'And I saw...' introduce the seven pieces of two of the 'missing' series (as underlined). The remaining series is made up of seven pieces that begin with, 'And he said...', and variations. What is written today about this last book of the Bible? Two volumes by the same author speak of the Revelation's structure as an extremely intricate and complex one, without declaring what it is! And both books have attracted much admiration for their scholarship. Whoops!

I'll allow myself a little more space on 'structural frameworks'. Often there are hints and checks to be found that were provided by the writer, actually in the text! In the first piece of Matthew's Gospel, for example, the rhetor tells his reader that he is interested in 'threes' and 'fourteens': the reader can expect to discover more of these as he reads on. In fact, of the eleven Sections of Matthew's Gospel, nine comprise 'fourteen' pieces and two paralleling sections comprise 'three times fourteen' pieces each. With Mark's Gospel's 'Four' Series of 'Seven' Days, the Four Series are set in chiasm, ABB'A' and the Seven Days in

the symmetrical layout of ABB'XABB', three days, a turning point day and three days (which is Homer's layout for his *Iliad*). In the final part of the Prologue, which is 1.2-20, in the calling of two pairs of disciples, we have a check against the 'Four' Series ('two' and 'two'; AA' and BB') and in the first part of the Epilogue, which when it is rhetorically analysed and fully-parsed is 16.9-16,19-20a, we have a reference to Mary Magdalene from whom Jesus had expelled 'seven' demons. Here is a check on the 'Seven' Days per Series. You may think that this is simply too far-fetched, but other numbers come up elsewhere that have a bearing on the structural integrity of the texts in which they sit. In Matthew's Gospel the final piece introduces the number 'eleven' for the first time in the gospel. The 'eleven' disciples meet with the risen Lord. For the reader of the text, at the last it confirms that he/she was right to have discovered eleven sections in the presentation. (See above for my reference to the numbers of the gospel's opening piece.) Other numbers in the New Testament include 'six', 'thirty-eight', 'eighty-three' and '153' in John's Gospel and '276' in the Acts of the Apostles.

A simple structure or framework is one that can be described as symmetrical, chiasmic, or in the form of a matrix, or even, as in Mark's Gospel, in a combination of all three. Given then that every text has both a structural framework and the repeating use of a writing style, this means that all the texts *are* self-referencing. All the Days in Mark's Gospel, for example, are completed ABB' arrangements of A, B and B' parts which all likewise subdivide, as a, b, b' parts, which themselves all subdivide as .a, .b, .b' parts. Up to seven literary levels of text are discovered within any one New Testament text.

Structure and writing style clearly work together. Because they do, they assist the memorising and presenting of the works. These were additional responsibilities of rhetors in the first century, who were creating texts that had to 'work' in an oral/aural learning environment. Some writers go to great lengths to give their readers help with memorising. In Luke's Gospel, for example, which promises an ordered work in its Prologue: Section 3 comprises three moral sayings, three trials and three 'rebukings'; Section 3' comprises three denials, three trials and three rejections; and Section 4 comprises four pairs of stories each side of a central sermon which is made up of four blessings and woes, eight commands, four central statements, eight commands with promises attached and four stories of blessing and woe. (And it doesn't finish there!)

Because the writers of the New Testament were rhetors, who wrote to the rules of ancient rhetoric, they were Classical Greek writers who were schooled in Homer's *Iliad*, *The Odyssey* and other such writings. It shouldn't be surprising, therefore, to find the evidence of the influence of such writings upon the gospel texts and upon the Acts. Evidence of myth-creation is to be found to equal degree in all five New Testament books. For the sake of establishing eternal truths, the writers employed every skill and device they could effectively use. But ask yourself, if Luke had written about five blessings and woes, ten commands, five central statements and so on in his Section 5, would it have really changed anything in regard to its meaning? If five stories had preceded the sermon with five after it, and they all had been about Jesus calling sinners to be disciples, along with his fulfilling of 'the law' in the first and 'the prophets' in the last, would it have changed anything? I don't think so! In completion of 'Do to others as you would have them do to you', Mt. 7.12 reads: 'for this is the law and the prophets'. Luke has modelled his Section 4 upon this Matthaean piece which he places at its centre. (Along with chapter and verse, Q' can go too!) Similarly, with Lk. 13.31-35, Luke significantly uses another Matthaean piece around which he lays out his huge central section, which means it is also at the very centre of his whole gospel. Fascinatingly, John's Gospel is laid out around the same issue, in chapters 10 and 11, Jesus' willingness to die in Jerusalem. The Gospel writers are creative writers. They are rhetors who expose 'meaning' as truth above all else.

Or what about Mark's handling of the feedings of the five thousand and the four thousand, with their different numbers of people, loaves, fishes and baskets filled with fragments? These two days' tellings are set symmetrically opposite each other, but 8.17-20 begs that we understand them for what they mean because they are set together symmetrically around the episode where Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman discuss bread, crumbs, Jew and Gentile. The rhetor's purpose for the whole of his second Series is more important to him than what is historical, whether of fact in regard to numbers, events, or sequence of events. When the other gospel writers get to re-work the details of Mark's presentation, only Matthew keeps the two feedings. That they are set symmetrically opposite each other in Matthew's Gospel means this rhetor knew what Mark had been doing. In Luke and John, which are without the second of the two feedings, the meaning is changed completely.

Or the three different pictures we get of Calvary from the four gospel writers? From these very different portrayals we learn beautiful truths. We benefit from all three pictures, but they can't all be equally representative of what actually happened! We take what each telling means.

Or consider what is central to Jesus' Jerusalem days in Mark's Gospel. It is coupled with the last plotting against Jesus' life, which is placed opposite, in the gospel, to the first plotting against his life (Mk. 3.6). He was anointed for his burial ahead of his death. Jesus' head is said to have had expensive perfume poured over it, the whole contents of a single bottle! The name of the woman who did this for Jesus isn't told, though she will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached around the world. It will become known that Jesus was anointed for his burial by a woman before he died, because he would be risen before the women could anoint him in the tomb. But is there more? I think there is. Long before this rhetor wrote anything, the Apostle Paul described Jesus' death as 'a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Phil. 4.18, Eph. 5.11). This is what is supremely important here in this final Series of this Gospel, isn't it? In the manner of its telling the aroma was still on Jesus as he hung on the cross.

Jesus' Jerusalem Days begin with his arrival in Jerusalem and his late visit to the Temple. On the second day he clears the Temple. And on the third day he promises its destruction. The first of the three days (A, B and B') begins with Jesus sending two disciples to the village opposite to get his donkey. The first of the three days (A, B and B') that follow the middle day (X), begins with a very similar line, with Jesus sending two disciples into the city to prepare his Passover supper. In both cases, he knows things. On the second day the rhetor sets the death of Jesus opposite the day of Jesus' clearing of the Temple. And on the third day when the tomb is visited, Jesus is risen. There is meaning in the tellings of each day and there is meaning in the positioning of these pieces, either across a Series, or between two Series, A with A', or B with B'. What stands out for me is that on the first day of the gospel's narrative we read of a sunset and on the last day of the narrative we read of a sunrise. For the rhetor, the sun sets on the Old Covenant and rises on the New. The first day sees the sun setting on the old Sabbath and the last day sees the sun rising on the new Sabbath. For centuries, this gospel has been misread, misinterpreted and misrepresented.

But we must move to a conclusion. In the case, say, of the First Epistle of John, I show that the book consists of *four* sections (Langton gives it *five* chapters). The sections are in the chiasm, ABB'A', where A and A' (A *prime*) are outer sections that parallel, and B and B' (B prime) are inner sections that parallel. The theme of A is: 'God is Light; live in his Light'. The theme of A' is 'God is Love; live in his Love'. The theme of B is: 'Love not the World'. The theme of B' is: 'Love One another'. No commentary presents these things, yet these themes pop up out of the Greek text to the reader who takes time to identify the writing style that the rhetor used. This can be represented by ABB', as defined above. The proper reading of this or any other New Testament text is facilitated by identifying both the structure and the style. This is why we can be rid of both 'chapter' and 'verse': structure and style together offer us the internal means for referencing a text. Hence, for this First Epistle of John, for 4.14-5.20, we now have A'; for 3.18-4.3, we now have B'/B; for 2.15-17, we now have B/A/A, or B/A/Aa-b'; and for 1.5, we now have A/A/Ba.

### **Conclusion:**

My Touring Exhibition is worth a visit. Or it could visit your area. If you would like it to, get in touch with me. It's the work of one person only, be it of over thirty-three years. And it's a work that in the past has been much derided by scholars and brushed aside. But it exposes lots that have never been seen before! On the one hand this *is* surprising, given that after two thousand years we still have so much to learn about them. On the other hand it *is simply shocking*. Those who were expected to show discipline in their work are now found to be naked *and* shivering (I'm recalling the story of the King's Clothes).

This Exhibition is an invitation to the Church and to academia to look again at the foundational texts of Christian Faith, in the Greek, and in their Greco-Roman literary setting. Joe Public is invited too because he also has a stake in the Christian heritage of our country! Those also, who have turned away in unbelief from the church, might find its documents to be worthy of a fresh look.

It was Augustine who judged literary form and meaning as inseparable. Our capacity to discern meaning in any New Testament text is the greater for this Exhibition. It's true also that our facility is much increased for judging a text's purpose. And now, for a concluding

point, I refer again to Augustine who lamented late into the fourth century, 'No sooner did a priest receive a copy of the New Testament in Greek than, whether he was able or not, he translated it into Latin.' The Latin Vulgate project was born of this despair. The New Testament was needed in Latin, but it was needed in a single Latin version that could be trusted. What didn't get translated then, however, were those signifiers of style and structure and helps for memorising and performing the text. They were left behind, to lie in the Greek texts for discovery in our day. It is reason for despair today, when one thinks how the church has suffered schism and disunity over the interpretations of its texts.

My hope, therefore, is that my Touring Exhibition will stimulate a much-needed project for today, the establishing of a rhetorically analysed and 'fully parsed' Greek New Testament. Oh, and, of course, this text will be *self-referencing*. Chapter and verse will be a thing of the past. Needless to say, I do have such a New Testament text that is ready to act as a basis for this work. It is the Fifth Edition, which is yet to be published, of my most recent work, ***New Testament: New Testimony to the Skills of the Writers and First Readers, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition***, Ceridwen Press, Church Gresley, February 2013. The resulting book will be published with non-professionals in mind, who will be encouraged to translate the Greek for themselves, into their own language, either with an interlinear literal version at their side, or with one incorporated above or around the Greek text. The readers of this version of the New Testament will know that **no one will be standing** between them and the New Testament texts, though they may be aware that a first century Greek reader of the texts sits with them. The Bible Societies, I don't doubt, will want to continue doing what they always have done, which is to produce copy for different language groups which utilise the best scholarship around. But those who are responsible for the vast amount of secondary literature on the New Testament might like to consider taking a very big pause in what they are doing just now and give themselves time to catch up. The currents and consensuses have been on the turn for the past thirty-three years and few have been taking any notice.

For those who cannot get to my exhibition, or for those whom my exhibition cannot reach, I will be posting photos, as soon as they are ready, of the artworks to which I have made reference in this paper. My current edition, NT:NT(4), is available for you to purchase. My next edition will include my exhibitions artworks and papers, recent revisions to my 'parsing' and additional literal English translations.