"TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES":
BRIAN STOCK'S CONCEPT AND RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ON ANTIQUITY

Jane Heath

1. INTRODUCTION

The phrase "textual community" was originally coined by Brian Stock in his study of heretical and reform movements of the 11th and 12th centuries.[1] His immediate concern was with the impact of the rise of literacy in the middle ages, not with the broader question of "scriptural interpretation at the interface between education and religion." However, the way he explained the significance of the "textual community" bore directly on that theme.

A brief definition that follows Stock's original discussion might run something like this: a "textual community" is a community whose life, thought, sense of identity and relations with outsiders are organised around an authoritative text. The way it plays that role is through education and religion. The text is at the heart of the community's faith and piety; education contributes in a twofold sense: a *literate education* is important for those who take the lead within the group in interpreting the text; meanwhile the rest of the community receive a *textual education through socialisation* within the group, even if they remain illiterate themselves. One of the principal consequences of this definition is that it is possible for a textual community to exist in a society with high levels of illiteracy.

Since Stock first developed the model of the "textual community", the concept has been frequently taken up by others and applied to communities of different kinds in different periods. In the study of antiquity, scholars such as Jan Assmann, David Brakke, John Kloppenborg, Judith Lieu, Guy Stroumsa, Tom Thatcher and others have adopted the model. They use it in different ways to understand aspects of how authoritative texts function in the lives of ancient interpreters and their communities.

To my knowledge, the transfer of the terminology of "textual community" to antiquity has never been critically examined.[2] The exception is Brian Stock's own comments about it in his book *Listening for the Text* (1990), where he broadly approved its wider use, and sought to develop the theoretical side of the model further, and to explain how it needed to be adjusted for the study of antiquity. Yet the ancient setting is exceedingly different from the middle ages, and when a concept is taken from one setting and widely applied elsewhere, there are significant risks of sacrificing consistency, clarity or explanatory power. Since it bears closely on issues of the present collaborative discussion, I take this opportunity to assess the role the term plays in that scholarship. The first half of the paper will discuss Brian Stock's own usage of the term, the second half will comment on how it has been applied in the study of antiquity, with a view to a general critical appraisal of its value.

2. THE COINING OF A CONCEPT IN *IMPLICATIONS OF LITERACY*

Stock first put forward the idea of a "textual community" in *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, which was published in 1983 when he was working at the University of Toronto. In both language and substance, the concept bears the marks of being a child of its time and place. I begin by placing it in a broader social and intellectual cultural context.

The 20th century was an era of rapid change in telecommunications. Stock was born in 1939, less than two months after Franklin Roosevelt became the first president to give a

[1] STOCK (1983, 88–240).

[2] But for critical discussions of related issues, see RÜPKE (2005) on 'Buchreligionen' and JOHNSON (2010) on 'reading communities'.

speech that was broadcast on television, and ten years after Herbert Hoover became the first American president to have a phone on his desk. Radio had its heyday in the 1930s and 40s, but after World War II television developed rapidly. Between 1945 and 1948 sales of television sets increased fivehundredfold. Such rapid changes encouraged intense questioning over the relationship between technology of communication and psychological or cultural change.

In the academy, Toronto became the hub of debate about communications. Three Toronto scholars are particularly famous for their contributions in the mid-20th century: Howard Innis, whose *Bias of Communication* appeared in 1951; and two whose *magna opera* were published in the early 1960s: Eric Havelock, with *Preface to Plato* (1963), and Marshall McLuhan, with *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). Soon after this, Jack Goody and Ian Watt (then of Cambridge and California respectively) published an article entitled "The Consequences of Literacy" (1963).

Though working in separate disciplines and with different ideas, together these scholars pioneered the study of the role of communications in cultural change. They suggested that the "most fundamental factor in the cultural progress of man was change in modes of communication."[3] The influence of these ideas in the 20th century was immense. The fact that the computer, then still called a calculator, developed as a popular technology rather than a specialist tool for scientists probably owes something to the buzz of communications theory. In Toronto in subsequent years a string of publications from different scholars in different fields testified to the impact of these questions and ideas. Stock's *Implications of Literacy* is among these. The title echoes, but subtly contends with, Goody and Watt's piece on "The Consequences of Literacy". And although Stock is remembered to have "politely and publicly declined to be included" in a "Toronto school" of thought founded by Innis, Havelock and McLuhan (Goody made a similar denial of influence from the Toronto greats), it is hard to deny some connection with the questions and formulation of issues pioneered in those early days of communications theory.[4]

Stock's thesis, in the *Implications of Literacy,* was that there was a cultural transformation around 1000, due to the rise of literacy. Orality entered the world of texts, and life changed. Oral and literate henceforth functioned in new ways: oral communication now operated in a world of texts; knowledge and experience were fundamentally and pervasively textually organised and textually interpreted. As a whole, he aimed to link "literacy's rise to the emergence of similar modes of thought in different branches of the period's cultural life."[5] The rise of heresy in the early 11th century is *one* of these "branches".

At this period, a number heretical and reformist groups emerged in Europe. They arose in different places, their members came from different social backgrounds, and they were not united in doctrine. They were not only uncoordinated with one another, but unlike one another economically, socially and doctrinally. So how could their contemporary emergence be explained? Stock's concept of a "textual community" was designed to answer this. He argued that what they had in common was a "parallel use of texts, both to structure the internal behaviour of the groups' members and to provide solidarity against the outside world."[6]

Stock's analysis suggested that all the heretical and reformist groups had a text at their centre. They may not possess a written version of it, but there was at least a leader who knew it well and was able to appeal to it to reform the behaviour and thought of the group. The outside world was seen as "a universe beyond the revelatory text", and was deemed inferior in literacy and spirituality. Inside the group, the text offers a structured route by which individuals can hope to ascend to perfect understanding and communication with God. If the text was a primitive one, such as the gospels or Paul's letters, then it may well be used in a

---

[3] MURRAY (1989, 655).
[4] DE KERCKHOVE (1989, 74f., 77).
[5] STOCK (1983, 3).
[6] STOCK (1983, 90).

radical way to promote a "return" to a putative original pattern of life. This invariably led to social and religious conflict.[7]

Stock argues that the main aspects of experience that are affected by this pattern of reform are **ritual, symbolism, and orality**. Rituals now require a textual basis; symbolism insists on the distinction between figure and truth, in a way that depends on a prior sensibility to the literary structure of allegory; orality now operates within a world of texts. It is not necessary for all members of the group to be able to read, since the text and its interpretation can be disseminated by word of mouth. But even if communication within the group operates predominantly in an oral mode, their orality is structured by the text. The members of the group internalise the text through hearing it read and hearing the foundational, agreed interpretation repeated and explained. Within those limits that define the communal relation to the text, individual group members are free to develop their own interpretations or patterns of worship.[8]

This model of a textual community is, according to Stock, shared by both heretics and reformers. They differ in their attitudes to authority and the official church, but in their textual organisation they are, he argues, alike.[9]

3. WHAT DOES THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT OF "TEXTUAL COMMUNITY" HAVE TO DO WITH "SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND RELIGION"?

Stock did not set out to comment on "scriptural interpretation between education and religion" – the theme of this volume – but his model of the textual community did in fact bear closely on our topic.

In principle, the "text" of a "textual community" could be any text whose authority is conceived in terms of an ideal role in structuring the thought and behaviour of the group in order for them to attain salvation. That in itself is a good definition of "scripture". In Stock's original work, the textual community is always concerned with Christian scriptural interpretation, since the "texts" used by the medieval heretical groups were either scriptural or derivative of scripture.

"Education" is significant to the "textual community" in several ways. Firstly, a *literate education* matters because the text lies at the heart of the experience of faith. The importance of literacy creates social and intellectual variables. The question of *whether* people are literate will not affect whether or not they are able to participate in the group at all, but it will affect the nature of their participation. (Stock points out that there is often a distinction between learned and popular religious culture, where the former is literate and the latter is not.) Secondly, *how* literate the leaders are will affect the religious experience of the group, because the more sophisticated the education of the leaders, the more likely they are to transfer literate patterns of thought to other areas of religious experience. (Stock uses the example of symbolism.) For *all* group members, meanwhile, the *socialisation within the life of the community* is an important form of education. That is a textually oriented education, because the group's thought and behaviour are structured through the text. It shapes the way the members later make decisions about staying in the group, leaving it, or reforming it.

It goes without saying that textual communities are religious groups, but it is important that the model of the "textual community" highlights a particular dimension of religious experience, namely the social dimension. Stock intended to integrate "social" and "religious" spheres more than earlier scholars had done. He criticises explanations of the medieval heresies that overemphasise *either* social *or* religious factors. Overly "social" explanations, he suggests, are often built (following Troeltsch and Troeltsch's reading of Weber) on the distinction between "church" and "sect", where the "church" is conceived as institutional, the "sect" as starkly anti-institutional, and there is no space for middle ground. Overly

---

7 STOCK (1983, 90).
8 STOCK (1983, 90–92).
9 STOCK (1983, 88).

"religious" (doctrinal) accounts, meanwhile, are criticised by Stock for distinguishing too sharply between "orthodoxy" and "heresy". The idea of a "textual community" is of a social group whose faith is oriented toward a text, but may develop in tension with the established church.

The pertinence of the concept to the theme of the present volume, then, should not be in doubt. What remains to be examined more closely is the strengths and weaknesses of the concept itself.

4. The "Textual Community" as a Working Concept in *Listening for the Text*

Implications of Literacy was written with a particular historical focus on the middle ages. However, the concept of the "textual community" proved flexible, and was widely taken up and adapted for other communities in other historical settings. Stock recognised this, and in his book *Listening for the Text,* published in 1990, he addressed some of the issues that emerged from its broader application. One chapter is particularly relevant to our theme: under the title, "Textual Communities: Judaism, Christianity, and the Definitional Problem," Stock examined both the theoretical aspects of the model, and how it needs to be modified for application to antiquity. In what follows, I shall try to draw out strengths and weaknesses of his account.[10]

The theoretical part of the discussion is complex, because he seeks to place the concept of a "textual community" in a much broader interdisciplinary debate. To a large extent this takes the form of locating it in relation to dichotomies that have shaped various academic discussions. In the eight pages where he focuses on these issues, I counted nearly a dozen oppositional pairs, which are partly in parallel, partly interdependent, overlapping or intended to problematise one another. Thus the "textual community" is interpreted in relation to debates about diachronic vs. synchronic explanations, orality vs. literacy, literacy vs. textuality, what is spoken vs. what is meant, meaning vs. means of communication, inner vs. outer, composition vs. context, literary-psychological approaches vs. historical-sociological ones, and the relationships of these pairs to one another.[11] In the next section, he adds further contrasting pairs: community vs. narratives, and text vs. life.[12] Compared with his earlier discussion, he draws out one complication in particular – he adds "textuality" to the "orality vs. literacy" matrix.

It is important in all this to keep focused on the heart of his discussion. His central interest is in *the way a text works in society and how that can explain historical change.* Since that is his main concern, he is particularly interested in texts that bear closely on lived experience – especially rules and rituals. He makes some strong points about how texts can both shape and facilitate social change: texts objectify the truths that give the group their sense of identity. This increases self-consciousness, and provides a historical dimension to the community, whose history is captured in their foundational text. The truth becomes available in textual form, so people can debate it through the interpretation of the text. This encourages textual modes of argument, be they rational arguments built through verbal or other literate forms of reasoning, or be they historicising appeals to the "original meaning" of the central, sacred text.[13]

However, his discussion also has some persistent weaknesses. There are two areas in particular that emerge as problematic: textuality, and psychology.

4.1 Textuality: What is a "text"?

---

[10] Stock (1990, 140–58).
[11] Stock (1990, 141–8).
[12] Stock (1990, 151–2).
[13] Stock (1990, 154).

The concept of "text" plays a very ambiguous role in Stock's discussion, especially in relation to literacy and the written word. Already in *Implications* he argued that the text need not be written – it could be orally known.[14] That raises the question of what a text is, and of the significance of either the concept of "text" or the development of literacy skills. In *Listening,* the concept of "text" becomes even more elusive. In discussing different relationships between orality and literacy, he observes different kinds of textualities – those where literates have transformed the text into procedural knowledge, those where illiterates make magical use of a text that they cannot read, and those textualities that work orally, as in the case of Jewish halakah.[15] The "text" involved in each of these is quite different.

In discussing ritual, he argues that "the text *is what a community takes it to be*" (italics mine). This enigmatic phrase is closely connected with the location of the text in his thought between meaning and embodiment. He writes, "texts have propositional content but they are procedural knowledge." The text is "internal": it is "what actors understand by public rituals." The text seems to be what gives meaning to rituals – though the kind of text may be different for oral from literate society. Textuality, he suggests, is more important than literacy where self-conscious change in rituals is at stake.[16]

The concept of a text changes again when he considers antiquity. He rightly perceives that *faith* is in the "word"; orality is a "metaphor" for communication with God.[17] But once the "word" is notionally captured in the text, then the text becomes available both for performative rituals that reconstitute the experience of hearing God speak, and a source of proof for arguments based on text. With some vagueness, he explains what "textual community" means in this context:

> We can think of a textual community as a group that arises somewhere in the interstices between the imposition of the written word and the articulation of a certain type of social organisation. It is an interpretive community, but it is also a social entity.[18]

In subsequent discussion, however, the notion of the "text" and its relationship to the community is transformed again several times. First, Stock argues that the Scriptures cannot serve as a text for a textual community because they are not rules of life in themselves. Texts for textual communities are things like monastic rules or the Mishnah.[19]

But then, when considering antiquity under the light of its (as he thinks) high levels of literacy,[20] he concludes that texts were often long and complex and that communities preceded texts. He commutes the notion of "textual community" for that of "combination of narratives, in which the actor's role is much like the dramatic performance of a script." "Contexts," he suggests, could "transcend the textual communities, as churches consolidate their identification with the narratives of which they are a part." What results is the need for "aesthetic coherence", which is associated with ritual and ethical behaviour.[21]

He gives one example of early Christian textual communities, namely those that are centred on Paul's letters. Like the medieval heretics, he suggests, Paul's communities were not bound together by social group, but by a common form of text-centred education, where belief was oriented on a text, and that "was played out in a drama where oral confronted written". The phrase from Paul that seems to have struck him most, to which he refers several times, is the contrast between spirit and letter ("Paul never tires of telling his followers of the advantages of the spirit over the letter," he writes – Paul in fact mentions this contrast only a couple of times). The purpose of this emphasis is again to underscore the importance of embodiment in the notion of a textual community.[22] However, his conclusion places surprisingly little emphasis on textuality: "The application of the concept of a textual

---

[14] STOCK (1983, 90f., 101).
[15] STOCK (1990, 144f.).
[16] STOCK (1990, 145f.).
[17] STOCK (1990, 149).
[18] STOCK (1990, 150).
[19] STOCK (1990, 150f.).
[20] He has been picked up on this elsewhere: BRAKKE (1999, 213).
[21] STOCK (1990, 151f.).
[22] STOCK (1990, 156f.).

community to early Christian life and thought ... has advantages over early approaches in one respect. It allows that the most important influences on forming the ideas that make a group cohere are those that take place among the group's members during the process of conversion, initiation, and confirmation. These are the rituals of self-definition."[23] But such rituals are things about which we know very little for the earliest Christians, and to the extent that we do know about them, they would seem to be aspects of Christianity that did *not* require extensive *written* textuality.

In all this, the text comes to seem a rather elusive concept. It not only *functions* in different ways, it actually *is* different, and sometimes (perhaps even often) it is not written at all, or known in writing, or even verbally. This lends flexibility to Stock's concept, but at the price of conceptual vagueness.

4.2 Psychology: Is a "textual community" psychologically plausible?

The ambiguity over the nature of the text arises partly from Stock's special interest in the relation of text and embodied life. This same focus gives rise to a second area of weakness or at least tension in Stock's approach, namely that the more he develops it as a *model,* the more it raises *psychological* questions about what it means to have a (communal) life patterned on a text. Is that even possible, or is it only aspirational? If the latter, then why is it that the correspondence of life to a *text* should be so appealing in the human psyche? Stock seems to recognise these questions but declines to engage with the psychological debate. Instead, he introduces a distinction between literary-psychological and socio-historical approaches, which he calls compositional and contextual approaches to the topic. He limits his own purview to the latter.[24] But, psychology keeps coming back, even when he tries to close the door on it firmly.

One of the guises under which it repeatedly returns is that of ritual. Here Stock conspicuously fails to maintain a strictly historical approach. Ritual takes an important place in his discussion because as he conceives it, ritual is not only a category of great social and religious significance, but it is also one that is fundamentally changed by a literate mindset. His argument engages with the psychology of literacy. In his view, the written word is the symbol for inner meaning, therefore it is only where there is literacy that people look for deeper meaning in rituals. He argues that it was *because* people in the early Middle Ages did not search for inner meaning in their rituals that "no trouble was taken to record rituals in writing."[25] However, the close nexus that he tries to build between "inner meaning" and "writing" is untenable. In his account there is a reciprocity that is in danger of becoming circular: literacy and writing lead to a belief in inner meaning, while belief in inner meaning leads to literacy and writing. Moreover, Stock's argument is grounded in a faulty psychology of the relationship between meaning and the written word. He falsely assumes a psychological barrier to searching for inner meaning without the written word. Granted, writing has often been associated with inwardness in Western history, but this is a product of cultural conditioning, not a psychological or neurophysiological inevitability.

4.3 Summary

In the end, one must concur with the reviewer of Stock, who commented that:

> The impression left by *Listening for the Text* is of a bold case incompletely stated and of exciting work in progress. It would be unfair at this point to pronounce either for or against Stock's thesis of the late antique roots (or proximate origins) of modern western textuality. Whatever its final merits, his statement of the case is certain to bring a new kind of scrutiny to bear on a phase of European culture that particularly invites interdisciplinary treatment. Those who are attracted by the general shape of Stock's arguments will have to address some large questions.[26]

---

[23] STOCK (1990, 157f.).
[24] STOCK (1990, 147f.).
[25] STOCK (1990, 145f.).
[26] VESSEY (1992, 146f.).

There are two questions that have loomed large in my own reading of Stock's breathless chapter, as outlined above: first, the relationship between orality, literacy and textuality, where the concept of the "text" becomes ever more difficult; second, the tension between psychological and historical approaches, where the model of "textual community" repeatedly raises issues of the psychology of textuality that Stock's historical approach is ill-equipped to address. These two questions must be carried through to the discussion of how recent scholarship has taken up Stock's concept in discussion of antiquity.

5. "Textual Communities" in Modern Scholarship on Antiquity

Stock's concept of the "textual community" has been often repeated and widely received in the study of ancient Christian, Jewish and pagan antiquity. The table attempts to summarise a sample of the recent contributions. They are wide-ranging (see fig. 1). I offer a brief summary here of the research contexts in which it has been used, as an orientation to the material:

- Jan Assmann uses the idea of the "textual community" to explore the stages by which the Hebrew canon emerged;
- Dirk Baltzley uses it to understand how Plato came to acquire the sort of authority he had in Neoplatonism, where reading his texts was a mystical experience that contributed to salvation;
- Matthias Becker uses it to interpret the rivalry between Origen, Porphyry and Eusebius, which focused on the identification of authoritative texts and methods of textual interpretation;
- David Brakke uses it to chart the development of Christianity from a Jewish sect to a group that pursues salvation by education and textual study;
  elsewhere, Stock's concept of textual community provides him with research questions to explore the range of scriptural practices in early Christianity that preceded the fixing of the canon;
- Eduard Iricinschi assumes rival Pauline textual communities in his analysis of strategies of "religious advertising" found in the Gospel of Philip;
- John Kloppenborg looks for traces of Christian book culture from the second century, and finds some in the introduction of textual practices into historical narratives about the origins of the Jesus movement, others in the emergence of "reading communities" attested in Justin, Apocryphon of James, and the Gospel of Thomas;
- Robin Lane Fox uses the term in discussing the tight link between literacy and power in the early church, which he contrasts with pagan, and to some extent Jewish, patterns of authority and dissent;
- Maren Niehoff suggests that the *Timaeus* created a textual community, when Celsus wrested it from the reverence accorded it by Philo;
- Guy Stroumsa explores the developing Christian culture of education in relation to the affirmation of sacred texts, and regards the monastic communities as textual communities *par excellence*;
- Tom Thatcher draws on the concept to explain the emergence of rebel groups in first century Palestine, and Josephus' reaction to them.

The dates of these publications show that this has become something of a buzz term in recent years. Not only is there great diversity in the research contexts, but its interpretation is also varied. I found considerable homogeneity in the presentation of definitions of a textual community, but in the development of their discussions, different papers emphasise quite different aspects of the model. A summary might look something as follows:

Aspects of the textual community model	Scholars who make this aspect central

Oral milieu: a community can form around a text even where many are not literate	LIEU; THATCHER
Attitude towards a text (as authoritative/sacred)	ASSMANN; BALTZLEY; NIEHOFF
Methods of reading and exegesis	BECKER, BRAKKE, STROUMSA
Competition with rival communities	ASSMANN; BECKER; IRICINSCHI;
Instigation of political opposition, or implication in social power	ASSMANN; LANE-FOX; THATCHER
Textual sense of communal identity, and differentiation from others	*ALL* but esp. KLOPPENBORG, LIEU, NIEHOFF
Stages in the formation of a TC	BRAKKE; THATCHER
Contribution to Canon formation	ASSMANN; BRAKKE

Some emphasise the significance of the *oral milieu*, repeating Stock's point that a community can form around a text even in a society with a very low level of literacy (HAINES-EITZEN, LIEU, THATCHER). Some draw on the textual community model because of its emphasis on the *authority and sanctity of a text*. This is important for ASSMANN in his investigation of the origins of the canon, and for BALTZLEY in his account of how Plato came to be an authoritative text that provided a path of salvation, with Plato himself as mystagogue. In the hands of others, the model of "textual community" brings out the centrality of a particular *mode of reading or exegesis* within a social group: BECKER underscores allegorical exegesis, STROUMSA monastic meditation combined with writing of the self, BRAKKE a kind of Platonic intellectual reading of parabolic texts. For some scholars, the element of *religious or intellectual competition between rival textual communities* is central in their use of this concept, for example IRICINSCHI assumes rival Pauline textual communities as the Sitz-im-Leben for the Gospel of Philip; NIEHOFF explores how the *Timaeus* came to be revered by Philo, only for Celsus to wrest it from the Jews for the Neoplatonists; BECKER studies the tensions between Porphyry and the Christians. Other scholars attend to *how this kind of competition can play out in the political realm.* This may involve *violence*, as in the rebel groups that formed in the first Jewish revolt (studied by THATCHER), or the non-violent exercise of *political power* or *social influence*, whose protean manifestations are irreverently but expertly explored by Lane Fox. In all the studies I examined, the tight relationship between text and *identity* is important, but in some this is elevated to the central purpose of the discussion, as when John KLOPPENBORG examines the origins of Christian book culture. Many of the authors cited explore textual communities ready-made, or under only some aspects, but for others the historical stages by which they emerge are important, particularly for THATCHER's study of Josephus and BRAKKE's of the Apocryphon of James.

The scholarly uses of the model also differ in which texts that they envisage as central to the communities, and correspondingly in their concept of community itself. Most of those studied here are exploring Christian scriptural culture, or Classical, especially Neoplatonist, book culture. But the texts, or individuals who act as interpreters mediating these foundational texts to their communities, are very diverse.

Furthermore, the studies diverge on what counts as scripture at the foundation of the textual community – ASSMANN emphasises that it is a "library" of authoritative texts; NIEHOFF that it is a particular text, the Pentateuch or the *Timaeus.* NIEHOFF differentiates it from Canon; BRAKKE regards the formation of textual communities as a step on the way to canon; STROUMSA takes the Canon of the Hebrew Scripture or LXX as the primary foundational text for both Jews and Christians, whom he regard as competing for the right interpretation in the second century. In his analysis, the New Testament and the Mishnah became foundational texts for their textual communities as a whole, then the commentary traditions introduced a further layer of local differentiation within the communities.

5.1 Problems in the "Textual Community" model

So much diversity in the application of the concept of "textual community" makes it important to sound a few notes of caution. A model that is very flexible is always a risk, lest

it be applied too readily to everything, such that it ceases to clarify anything at all. When a society has some literate culture, then texts are usually significant to its organisation in some way, though this takes different forms in different social groups. The scholars who discuss textual communities in Jewish, Christian and Classical Antiquity tend to mention several further communities that could be described in this way – Orphism, Islam, Essenes at Qumran and so on. Is it still significant to distinguish textual communities from other communities at all?[27]

We should be particularly cautious with a model that our own culture conditions us to find seductive. Regarding texts: as scholars of antiquity, our sources are mainly texts, our own educational training is particularly in textual methods, our culture and, for some, our faith, has been shaped by devotion to sacred texts.

Likewise, regarding communities: Stanley Stowers wrote an article deconstructing the "promiscuous application of the language of community to antiquity, and pointing out that the concept is romantic ideal of "a deep social and mental coherence, a commonality in mind and practice." Stowers associates it with anti-Enlightenment and Romantic values, found not least in National Socialism and other conservative movements prior to World War II.[28] We do not need to follow him in suggesting that the notion of community appeals to us in the same way as it did to the National Socialists in order to accept his underlying observation that we find the notion of "community" attractive, both emotionally and intellectually.

Our own culture and methods, then, make it likely that the notion of a "textual community" will carry some emotional appeal in our study of our religious and educational origins. Furthermore, the ostensible simplicity of the phrase "textual community" means that the language itself is likely to be compelling: it is still possible to talk about "textual communities" without defining the term closely, by contrast with the technical language of much scholarly theory. Consequently, we feel as though talking of "textual communities" makes sense, even if in reality it may be homogenising and simplifying complex social and religious phenomena. These factors should not make us dismiss the concept, but they should leave us wary.

Both the "texts" and the "communities" of the so-called textual communities studied in antiquity sometimes emerge from the discussion as hazier than the term "textual community" would imply. Judith LIEU points out that the earliest stage of the Jesus movement did not rely on texts: "there is little to suggest that the Jesus movement was, in the person and circumstances of its founder, predicated upon the precise interpretation of the Jewish sacred literary texts."[29] In some of the texts she studies, she finds ambivalence about the phenomenon and significance of scriptural textuality itself. This is particularly the case in the Johannine corpus, where the Johannine community compete with the Jews over the true interpretation of scripture, but at the same time they regard Jesus as the Word, and the one who speaks words that embody or transcend the written scriptural tradition.[30] Tom THATCHER's study of the Jewish War throws up a particularly marked example of the difference between the perspective of Josephus, who lacked the language of a "textual community", and that of THATCHER, who promoted it. THATCHER treats the instigation of violence in response to Herod's golden eagle as a "textbook illustration" of a textual community (Jos. *BJ* 1.648-55). To some extent this makes good sense – the young men are accustomed to listen to the rabbis lecturing on "the ancestral law", and when their lecturers stir up opposition they appeal to the interpretation of the law. It is the law that they cite as their authority for their actions, when they are challenged. But in Josephus' description, the notion of *text* (even if one allows it to be a text moving in an oral culture), is only one cultural factor among others in discerning the way the oppositional movement grows. Josephus' account is full of culturally resonant nuances that imply *his* explanation of events, but that are passed over in THATCHER's account of the "textual community" – he interprets the rabbinical

[27] Cf. RÜPKE (2005, 196).
[28] STOWERS (2011, 238f.).
[29] LIEU (2004, 36).
[30] LIEU (2004, 41f.).

leaders as "sophists", observes the significance of the circumstance of Herod's declining health, emphasises the power of rumour, the young men's lust for a glorious martyrdom, and their anticipation of post-mortem felicity. The law is central, but its importance is experienced through a wider cultural system of roles, circumstances and beliefs that cannot be reduced to the power of textuality alone. Indeed, in general THATCHER's argument depends on the notion that the kinds of things Josephus describes are only conceivable on the basis of reinterpreting scripture, even when Josephus does not say so.[31]

As for "communities", these are even more hazily delineated. Some scholars acknowledge that there was no community in Stock's medieval sense in the groups that they study. For NIEHOFF and LIEU, this leads them to invoke Benedict Anderson's concept of an "imagined community", where a sense of community is established across great distances. LANE FOX points out that Christianity could not have gained power if it had not been for the sense of community gained through the text. Others, however, assume communities with little or nothing to clarify what these groups are beyond the imagined readers of the text – thus IRICINSCHI locates GosPhil in the context of a supposed rivalry between Pauline textual communities, while KLOPPENBORG supposes "reading communities" for the Apocryphon of James and the GosThom, though he can say nothing about their social configuration. Others, like BECKER, give most attention to the intellectual leaders, such that the social implications of the debates remain shadowy.

On the whole, then, I regard the language of "textual community" as problematic, and the concept it articulates as ill defined. However, in conclusion I should like to draw attention to some of the benefits that Stock's pursuit of 'textual communities' can bring to the discussion, particularly the discussion of scriptural interpretation at the interface between education and religion.

5.2 Effective discourse about "textual communities"

Discourse about "textual communities" is most useful when presented as a question rather than a solution. The attempt to identify and understand them raises a question of *how texts organise society through education and religion* – or, more simply, it asks, "*What does a text* do *in society, and how*?" The idea of the "textual community" can help explore these issues in societies where the texts and practices of religion and education are closely defined, and in comparative study of societies whose religion and education develop in relation to each other. In those kinds of studies, one is less likely to fall into the trap of homogenising and simplifying the evidence. Studies cited in this paper show a range of different ways in which the social and scriptural interface between religion and education could be characterised, depending on context. In some contexts, *religious competition is framed in terms of academic debate*, as in the debate between Origen, Porphyry and Eusebius, studied by BECKER. The model has also brought out how *education can help deepen personal religion, and be itself a means of salvation*. This is the emphasis in BALTZLEY's study of Plato's role in Middle and Neoplatonism, and in BRAKKE's discussion of the Apocryphon of James. The concept of "textual community" has also contributed to exploring the *integration between different religious and cultural traditions*: this is STROUMSA's principal concern, where he shows how Christianity's insistence on retaining both the religious devotion to One Book and the cultural devotion to the several books of classical tradition, led to the creation of an educational and religious culture where scripture was read alongside the Classics. STROUMSA calls this a "religion of the paperback", and he describes it as if it were a diminution of religion proper. He writes, "the authority of the text officially belongs to God, but in practice it remains in the hands of the community of believers."[32]

This theologically deflating conclusion is theologically unnecessary, but it draws attention one significant aspect of the concept of textual community: it is a concept that focuses on the *sociological* dimensions or implications of the interrelationship between texts, education, and

[31] THATCHER (1998, 135f.).
[32] STROUMSA (2012, 40).

religion. A textual community is a setting in which theological debate is possible among the educated, religious elites, but the concept of textual community itself is not a theological one, and cannot answer theological questions.

5.3 A theological coda

The question of theology in relation to the textual community, however, cannot be completely left aside. The model of the textual community may not be able to answer theological questions, but it does raise theological questions, and it can itself be theologically construed. The notion of a textual community grasps at an ideal of complete reciprocity between text and life. I close with two images from Christian tradition that point to some of the possibilities of engaging with this in theologically and devotionally rich ways.

Firstly, Stroumsa shows how the image of the book of the heart shapes the way in which scripture is contemplated in monastic culture. The interior book articulates the psychology that makes a textual community possible: because the human heart is a book, it can be transformed into a more faithful response to scripture. Confessional writing practices among the monks attempt to do just this: they rewrite and reform the book of the heart.[33]

Not only could the heart be envisaged devotionally as a book, but the book could also be envisaged devotionally as a person. In particular, the book could be contemplated as the person who most perfectly embodied the text. Christian tradition understands this to be Jesus Christ. A sermon by John Fisher captures this aspect of medieval piety, where the book of the Word is honoured as the body of Christ:

> Neuer anye Parchement skynne was more strayghtlye stratched by strength vpon the tentors then was this blessed body vpon the crosse. These lorells that crucifyed him, drewe by vyolence his moste precious armes, with ropes vnto either braunche of the crosse, that the sinowes burst in sonder, and so nayled his handes fast with spykinge nayles of yron, vnto the crosse. After they stretched his feete lykewyse vnto an other hole beneath the crosse, and there nayled them with the third nayle through bothe his feete. And so they reared vp this body a loft against the sunne, euen as a parchment skinne is sette foorth before the heat of the Sun for to drye. It was set vp a loft to the entent that all the worlde might looke vpon this booke.[34]

Jesus' flesh and the parchment are one; the writing is the wounds on the page. The materiality of the text is meditated upon in terms of the materiality of the passion – and vice versa. The sociological concept of the textual community does not itself answer theological questions, but when its implications are followed through, it takes us to the foot of the cross, and the theology of the incarnation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ASSMANN, J., *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis,* Munich 2004.

BALTZLEY, D., "Plato's Authority and the Formation of Textual Communities", *Classical Quarterly 64* (2014) 793–807.

BECKER, M., "Bedeutungszuschreibung in konkurrierenden Textgemeinschaften. Überlegungen zu einem Porphyrios-Zitat bei Eusebios (*Hist. eccl.* 6,19,1-11)", in: C. Haß et E.-M. Noller (eds.), *Was bedeutet Ordnung – was ordnet Bedeutung? Zu bedeutungskonstituierenden Ordnungsleistungen in Geschriebenem*, Berlin 2015, 25–50.

BOWMAN, A. and WOOLF, G. (eds.), *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World,* Cambridge 1997.

BRAKKE, D., "Parables and Plain Speech in the Fourth Gospel and the Apocryphon of James", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999) 187–218.

BRAKKE, D., "Scriptural Practices in Early Christianity: Towards a New History of the New Testament Canon", in: J. Ulrich, A.-C. Jacobsen et D. Brakke (eds.), *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity,* Frankfurt am Main 2012, 263–280.

[33] STROUMSA (2008, 68–77).
[34] John Fisher, quoted in KEARNEY (2009, 19).

DE KERCKHOVE, D., “McLuhan and the ‘Toronto School of Communication’”, *Canadian Journal of Communications* 14 (1989) 73−79.

GOODY, J. and WATT, I., “The Consequences of Literacy”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963) 304−345.

IRICINSCHI, E., “If You Got it, Flaunt it: Religious Advertising in the *Gospel of Philip*”, in: E. Iricinschi et H. M. Zellentin (eds.), *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, Tübingen 2008*,* 253−272.

JOHNSON, W. A., *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study in Elite Communities*, Oxford 2010.

KLOPPENBORG, J. S., “Literate Media in Early Christ Groups: The Creation of a Christian Book Culture”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 22 (2014) 21−59.

LANE FOX, R., “Literacy and Power in Early Christianity”, in: A. Bowman et G. Woolf (eds.), *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World,* Cambridge 1994, 126−148.

LIEU, J. M., *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World,* Oxford 2004.

MURRAY, O., “The Word is Mightier than the Pen”, *Times Literary Supplement* 16-22 June (1989), 655f.

NIEHOFF, M, “Did the *Timaeus* Create a Textual Community?” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 47 (2007), 161-191.

RÜPKE, J., “Heilige Schriften und Buchreligionen: Überlegungen zu Begriffen und Methoden”, in: C. Bultmann, C.-P. März, V. N. Makrides (eds.), *Heilige Schriften: Ursprung, Geltung und Gebrauch,* Münster 2005, 191−204.

STOCK, B., *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,* Princeton 1983.

STOCK, B., *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past,* Philadelphia 1990.

STOWERS, S., “The Concept of ‘Community’ and the History of Early Christianity”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011) 238−256.

STROUMSA, G., “The Scriptural Movement of Late Antiquity and Christian Monasticism”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008) 61−77.

STROUMSA, G., “Scripture and *Paideia* in Late Antiquity”, in: M. R. Niehoff (ed), *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters,* Leiden 2012, 29−42.

THATCHER, T., “Literacy, Textual Communities, and Josephus”, *Jewish War,*’ *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 29 (1998) 123−142.

VESSEY, M., “Literacy and *Litteratura,* A.D. 200-800”, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 13 (1992) 139−160.