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A relevance-theoretical perspective on the question of why Jesus never wrote a book

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Many reasons have been given for why Jesus never wrote anything. Some have argued that this was because he, or his audience, was illiterate; some that it was because Jewish rabbis only gave oral teaching; others that it was to avoid the idolatrizing of a divinely authored book. Moreover, given the deep reverence among the Jews for the written word found in the Torah, and the fact that Jesus claimed for himself the same authority as that upon which the Torah was based, it would seem legitimate to ask the question: why did he not seek to displace the Torah by a book of an equivalent or greater authority, like that claimed for the Koran in the Islamic tradition? The goal of this paper will be to bring to the table some linguistic arguments for why Jesus never committed any of his teachings to writing based on certain characteristics of natural language that have been highlighted by Relevance Theory, namely the underspecified nature of linguistic meaning and the consequent need for some way of narrowing down the range of possible interpretations of an utterance, as well as on the decontextualized character of written language.

Keywords: exegesis; relevance theory; semantics; pragmatics; personalism; textual criticism; Bible

Many reasons have been brought forward to answer the question as to why Jesus never wrote any texts or books. Crossan (1998: 235) argues that this was because Jesus himself was illiterate. This explanation is contradicted by the Gospel account of Jesus reading a passage of Scripture in the synagogue at Nazareth (*Luke* 4: 16–30). Moreover, it is inconsistent with what we know about Jewish society in those times, as Millard (2000: 157–8) observes:

There was a strong tradition of education in order that men, at least, should be prepared to read from the Scriptures in synagogue services. In theory, every Jewish male was expected to do so. The Palestinian Talmud reports the rule of Simeon ben Shetach about 100 BC that all children should go to school (*y. Ket.* 8.32c), and instruction in the Torah started early, according to both Philo and Josephus (*Leg. Gai.* 210; *Apion* 2.178).¹

Millard (2000: 185) goes on to claim that it was because of the illiteracy of his audience that the literate Jesus never wrote anything down. This argument is inconclusive, however, as he could have wanted to preserve his teachings in writing for

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future generations who did know how to read. Keith (2011: 150, 190) prefers to sit on the fence: while proposing that “Jesus likely did not hold scribal literacy,” he proposes that “Jesus was the type of teacher who was able to confuse his audience concerning his scribal-literate status.” This hypocritical behavior seems very out of character with what we know about Jesus, who taught his disciples “Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no,’ ‘no,’” and fustigated the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. Sangster (1932: 12), on the other hand, alleges that Jesus did not want to put anything down in written form in order to avoid bibliolatry, the worship of a book: “because it would have become a fetish; because it would have lent itself to bibliolatry; because man would have given a reverence to it as a book that belongs only to God himself.” Although there is something to be said for this argument, a look at Islam, where the Koran is seen as coming from God verbatim through the dictation of the archangel Gabriel, does not reveal any adoration of the sacred book: although extreme care is exercised in the preservation of the original text, to the point where translation is not even allowed (Ruthven 2006: 90), there are to my knowledge no shrines dedicated to the Koran.

Cole (1996: 211), for his part, makes a more plausible argument. He holds that the absence of Jesus-authored texts was due to his following the Jewish rabbinic tradition of dispensing strictly oral teaching. Stroumsa (2003, 2016, 2018) observes in this respect that in the tradition of the Pharisees and rabbis, one avoided writing books in order not to threaten the unique status and prestige of the Torah. He documents how this tradition was maintained even after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. and the consequent disappearance of the priestly caste. To give a specific example of this attitude which is almost contemporary with Jesus, Glatzer (1966: 26–7) notes in his study of the life and times of Rabbi Hillel the Elder (60 B.C. to 10 A.D.) that this famous teacher did not write anything down, but focused exclusively on the study and explication of the Torah, “looked upon as the perennial record of wisdom and instruction, ever ready to offer an answer to a question provided the proper logical principles [of midrash] were applied to the text.” Neusner (2003) observes furthermore that what little rabbinic literature there is concerns “not how the Jews lived, or even how they worshiped, but only the discussions of the rabbinic schools and courts; what the documents say is what we’re supposed to think, within the range of allowed difference.” Thus, even though there were Jewish sages, and a certain number of fairly lengthy anecdotes about them did exist in written form, there are no gospels in Judaism even though there very well could have been:

Hence the question raised here: why no gospels in Judaism? The question is an appropriate one, because there could have been. The final step – assembling the available stories into a coherent narrative with a beginning, middle and end, for example – is what was not taken. No document was devoted to the life of a given sage and his teachings, and none to the lives of sages and their teachings grouped together. (...) Even *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, which contains a good number of stories about sages, is not so organized as to yield a life of the sage or even a systematic biography of any kind. Where events in the lives of sages do occur, they are thematic and not biographical in organization.

Given the deep reverence among the Jews for the written word found in the Torah, and the fact that Jesus not only defined himself in opposition to the scribes and Pharisees, but claimed for himself the same authority as that upon which the Torah was based, it would seem legitimate to ask the question: why did he not seek to displace the Torah

by a book of an equivalent or greater authority like that claimed for the Koran in the Islamic tradition? Commenting on Jesus' claim to be Lord of the Sabbath, Neusner (2000: 87) puts the following words in the mouth of the fictional rabbi dialoguing with Jesus and his disciples:

From the perspective of the Torah as I understand it, only God is Lord of the Sabbath. All things that God wants me to know, God has delivered to me in the Torah. All of us know God through the Torah, and it is to all Israel that Moses has revealed the Torah. The Torah teaches me to rest on the Sabbath, because that is how I learn to act like God. All of this Jesus teaches in a different way and for another purpose. He, too, has heard the message of Sinai, but when it comes to the Sabbath he has taken personally what the rest of Israel have taken to speak to all of us, equally and at all at once. The disciple I meet along the way may argue that it is indeed so: through him we know the Father; through the Sabbath done his way we bear that yoke that is easy, that burden that is his. Once more, then, the disciple and I concur: Christ now stands on the mountain, he now takes the place of the Torah.

The question is then – if Jesus takes the place of the Torah, why did he not put down on paper his own book to replace the Torah after his death? The behavior of Jesus' immediate disciples represents a clear break with rabbinic tradition – rather than grouping together Jesus' sayings as scriptural commentaries on themes found in the Torah like the disciples of other rabbis did, they wrote narrative texts which recounted in a factual way what Jesus said and did during his public life. Why didn't Jesus, who not only was no slave to rabbinic tradition but actually presented himself as supplanting the Torah, break with this tradition and author a book to replace the Torah?

While there are important theological reasons for Jesus' behavior (see endnote 2), in this paper I wish to offer some linguistic arguments for the absence of written teachings by Jesus. These concern certain characteristics of language highlighted by Relevance Theory, namely the underspecified nature of linguistic meaning and the consequent need for some way of narrowing down the broad range of possible interpretations of an utterance. Relevance Theory sees linguistic communication as an inferential process in which hearers try to deduce speakers' intentions based on the clues provided by the language that speakers use. Sperber and Wilson (2002: 3) describe it as “essentially an exercise in *metapsychology*, in which the hearer infers the speaker's intended meaning from evidence she has provided for this purpose.” This process is guided by the principle that human cognition is relevance-oriented and that the hearer or reader follows the path of least cognitive effort, testing interpretative hypotheses in order of accessibility and stopping when expectations of relevance are satisfied. Thus, for example, in the following dialogue taken from Sperber and Wilson (2002: 19–20), the inferential process is characterized as follows:

- (1) **Peter:** Can we trust John to do as we tell him and defend the interests of the Department in the University Council?

Mary: John is a soldier!

Peter's mentally represented concept of a soldier includes many attributes (e.g. patriotism, sense of duty, discipline) which are all activated to some extent by Mary's use of the word 'soldier'. However, they are not all activated to the same degree. Certain attributes also receive some activation from the context (and in particular from Peter's immediately preceding allusions to trust, doing as one is told, and defending interests), and these become

the most accessible ones. These differences in accessibility of the various attributes of ‘soldier’ create corresponding differences in the accessibility of various possible implications of Mary’s utterance, as shown in (4):

- (4) (a) John is devoted to his duty.
 (b) John willingly follows orders.
 (c) John does not question authority.
 (d) John identifies with the goals of his team.
 (e) John is a patriot.
 (f) John earns a soldier’s pay.
 (g) John is a member of the military.

Following the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, Peter considers these implications in order of accessibility, arrives at an interpretation which satisfies his expectations of relevance at (4d), and stops there. He does not even consider further possible implications such as (4e)-(4g), let alone evaluate and reject them.

Note here how the context plays a crucial role in activating certain attributes of the concept of “soldier” and backgrounding others. It should be noted also that underlying even this seemingly obvious interpretation there are many further assumptions about what the situation is and what the speaker’s intentions are, above and beyond those considered by Sperber and Wilson. Imagine, for instance, that Peter is notorious among his friends for mixing up people’s names; Mary’s exclamation might then be interpreted as intended to remind Peter that he must have been intending to ask about their professor colleague Joe and not their soldier friend John. The process of utterance interpretation is thus fraught to the core with situation-dependent factors.

Even arriving at a minimal logical proposition requires pragmatic processing: Relevance Theory clearly recognizes that “linguistic semantics is generally not enough to give any truth-conditional meaning at all” (Chapman 2011: 118). What this means is that in order to arrive even at the basic core of the speaker’s intended message, the meaning of the linguistic units themselves is insufficient, and the hearer has to add in a number of implicit notions, connections to the speech situation, and inferences before he can understand even the bare bones of what the speaker is trying to communicate. Among this implicit content are things like reference assignment and resolution of semantic ambiguities. Thus, in order to know whether *He is sick* is true, one has to know who the pronoun *he* is being used to refer to (the speaker’s father, the class’s professor, the speaker’s sister’s dog, etc.); and in order to know how to answer the question *Do you believe in clubs for young people?*, one has to know which sense of the word *club* is intended – as those who know W.C. Field’s quip reply *Only when kindness fails* are aware.

Carston (2002) shows that there is an even wider range of pragmatic determinants of propositional content than reference assignment and ambiguity resolution. Thus in (2) below, cited by Bardzokas (2012: 29), the speaker is not understood to be simply predicating of John the property of excessive tiredness, but to be putting his degree of tiredness into relation with some action that John might be expected to perform in the situation in which the utterance is made:

- (2) John is too tired.

The full propositional content intended to be communicated by the speaker requires considerable pragmatic enrichment of the information conveyed by the

linguistic code: as Carston (1991: 48) puts it, “a hearer must do a lot of pragmatic work (which involves quite distinct abilities from his linguistic ones), on the basis of the logical form derived from the linguistic form of the utterance, before he has a representation which is truth-evaluable.”

To the list of pragmatic processes that can contribute to the determination of “what is said,” Recanati (2004: 4) adds enrichment, loosening and semantic transfer, as exemplified by the following sequences:

- (3) I already ate.
- (4) Mary took out the key and opened the door.
- (5) France is hexagonal.
- (6) The ham sandwich left without paying.

In example (3) the two-place predicate “eat” requires a second argument to be supplied by reference to the situation. In (4) the predicate “open” is used to convey a richer meaning than the lexicalized one, namely the *ad hoc* concept of “open with a key”. In example (5) the predicate *hexagonal* is employed in a loose sense to convey the *ad hoc* concept of “approximately hexagonal”. And in (6) the noun phrase *ham sandwich* refers to the person who ordered the ham sandwich, i.e. to a referent in a metonymic relation to the sandwich.

Ariel (2008: 264) sums up the picture in the following way:

The assumption that linguistic semantic meaning radically underdetermines actual utterance interpretation in general, and truth-conditions in particular, is now shared by researchers in the field, regardless of their radically different solutions for bridging the gap.

Drawing the consequences of this view, Saeed (2011: 473) observes that it radically alters the traditional Gricean relation between semantics and pragmatics:

Since pragmatic inferences contribute to propositional content, then clearly if there is a purely semantic representation, it is pre- or sub-propositional. Or to put it another way, both semantic interpretation and pragmatic inference combine in the formation of propositional truth-bearing content.

Ariel (2008; 2010) thus argues for a distinction between “grammar” and “pragmatics” defined in terms of the difference between “code” – “conventional associations correlating specific forms with their obligatory or optional rule-governed positioning, meaning and distributional patterns” (2008: 1–2) – and “inference”, or “plausible inferred interpretations enriching our encoded messages” (2008: 2). She utilizes the possibility of speakers creating “wise-guy interpretations” (2010: 116–8) to demonstrate the existence of “the purely linguistic semantic meaning” or “the unenriched linguistic code,” which she characterizes as being “more minimal” than the Gricean “what is said”. She therefore advocates letting go of “the old-time idea that the sentence expresses a complete proposition” (2010: 98) and recognizing the necessity of pragmatic enrichment for the determination of the truth or falsity of a good number of sentences. In her view, the essential criterion proposed for distinguishing encoded and inferred meanings is cancelability: “the code versus inference approach adopts just one criterion for distinguishing the grammatical from the

extragrammatical, namely whether the function/use is conventionally encoded or rationally derivable by inference, in which case it may be canceled” (2010: 118).

However, Ariel, and Relevance Theorists along with her, still endorse the view that “semantics, as a component of grammar, is the specification of the rule-governed contribution that *sentences* of the language make to utterance interpretation [my emphasis]” (2010: 98). This represents a contradiction with the principle that grammar is part of the linguistic code, as most sentences are not stored in memory, nor do they exhibit stable form-meaning pairings. While one must agree with Ariel that an encoded meaning cannot be canceled, it can be demonstrated that although the subject control reading in a sequence such as *John wanted to play hockey* is non-cancelable, not even by an attempted wise-guy interpretation, it is nevertheless not linguistically encoded either, and consequently must be treated as a product of pragmatic-type inferencing rather than as belonging to the grammatical code. The upshot of all of this is that there is a lot more pragmatic work required in order to arrive at the speaker’s intended message than is assumed even by linguists working in a Relevance Theory perspective.

What does all this imply for written texts? As observed by Olson (1994: 265), written language is “decontextualized” in comparison to speech. A writer does not share with his reader, either spatially or temporally, a mutually perceivable utterance situation, and consequently cannot rely on context- and situation-based inferencing to the same degree that a speaker can. Among Plato’s objections to writing as described by Ong (2002: 78) is that whereas real speech exists essentially “in a context of give-and-take between real persons, writing is passive, out of it, in an unreal, unnatural world.” The effect of the absence of context in written communication translates into an absence of constraints to guide the interpretation of the linguistic expressions used in a written text. Some idea of the consequences of lack of context can be gained by considering a sentence such as *The wine is Italy* with no supporting linguistic context or utterance situation. This sequence of signs could convey a huge variety of different messages:

- in a multicultural meal, the wine could be Italy’s contribution to the repast
- someone could be exclaiming that the wine they are drinking is pure Italy
- the speaker could be referring to a bottle of wine being used to represent the geographical position of Italy with respect to Croatia, represented by a napkin
- the speaker could be referring to a wine spill on a white tablecloth that has formed in the shape of the Italian peninsula
- a headwaiter could be referring to wine destined for a table of Italians seated beside a table of Germans, who have ordered beer
- in a game like Risk, the wine bottle could be used to define an area around it which represents the country of Italy

When the text dates from several centuries before the moment at which it is being read, the interpretive challenge is even steeper. MacKenzie (2002: 36) remarks that:

We almost inevitably attribute anachronistic thematic meanings (or what Hirsch calls “significance”) to such texts. Although Hirsch allows that authors generally mean more than they are aware of meaning, he rejects a reading of *Hamlet* as a Freudian family romance because Shakespeare could not possibly have willed this. But even those of us familiar with Harold Bloom’s often repeated claim that it is Shakespeare who invented Freudian

psychology cannot possibly hope to transpose ourselves imaginatively from our context into that of Shakespeare and his original audience, thereby re-experiencing *Hamlet's* original meaning. The impossibility of simply abandoning our own "horizon" means that, try as we might, we will not be able to wholly re-create the context that an author would have regarded as optimally relevant for the audience she had in mind (...).

One is reminded here of a remark made by the famous British Egyptologist Sir Alan Gardiner, who admitted that although he could usually decipher all the words of an ancient inscription, he very often hadn't the faintest idea of what message it was meant to convey.

With respect to the interpretation of Christian scripture, MacKenzie (2002: 39) echoes Gutt's (1991) observation that "today's reader is almost certain to lack many of the contextual assumptions necessary to understand parts of the Gospels." As a case in point, the following utterance from Jesus has given rise to a multitude of different interpretations: "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." First of all, there are the various readings of the first clause "You are Peter" with reference particularly to the Greek and Aramaic words *petros*, *petra* and *cephas*. Was Jesus calling Peter "rock" or "stone"? What did he mean by nicknaming Simon as Cephas? What did he mean in the second clause by saying that upon this rock he would build his church? Many answers have been offered to this last question:

- *this rock* refers to Peter's confession and the clause conveys the idea that, upon the truth just confessed by Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus will build his church
- *this rock* refers to Jesus himself
- *this rock* refers to Peter as the main protagonist responsible for laying the foundations of the early church among the Jews and the Gentiles
- *this rock* refers to Peter as the first in a line of vice-regents of Christ who would be the foundation of the unity of the church through the ages.

The last clause has also been interpreted in a number of ways:

- *the gates of hell* signifies the rulers of hell, according to the ancient custom of city rulers sitting at the gates of the town
- *the gates of hell* refers to the gates of death and the sense is that neither death nor the grave will prevail over the people of God
- the enemies of the church are compared to a strong kingdom and by *gates* is meant cities which are made strong by well-planned strategy and solid fortifications, i.e. whatever Satan does by cunning or strength
- as gates are used to keep people in, Jesus is referring to the fact that death and Satan have no power to prevent his resurrection
- *the gates of hell* refers to the disputations of heretics, which will never prevail against the church
- the passage presents the church as on the offensive rather than defending itself, so the intended message is that Satan will not be able to stop the advance of the church.

Some of these interpretations are compatible with one another, but others are not, as is the case for the status of Peter in the church and whether he was meant to have successors.

The take-home point is therefore that there is no way to decide which message is intended by a written document if one refers only to the text. MacKenzie (2002: 2) criticizes deconstructionist accounts of language because they postulate “the death of the author” (Barthes 1967) and focus exclusively on the materiality of the text itself, thereby making the meaning of the text unattainable:

Unlike this inferential model of human communication and cognition [characteristic of Relevance Theory], deconstructionist accounts of language insist on the materiality of language, and disregard the enormous role played by contextual factors in linguistic communication. Paul de Man stated that “the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies, means that the interpretation of everyday language is a Sisyphean task, a task without end and without progress” (1983: 11). He further argued that since all words, names and concepts are metaphorical at root, they are unstable and deconstruct themselves even as they are asserted. (...) For de Man, rhetorical tropes and substitutions *always* render the propositional content of utterances and texts undecidable, and wreak “epistemological damage” (1996: 34) that wholly undermines intended meaning. Rhetoric thus “radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration” (1979: 10), and “puts an insurmountable obstacle in the way of any reading or understanding” (1979: 131).

MacKenzie (2002: 15) argues that deconstructionism only arrives at this conclusion because it is “an inadequate linguistic model that willfully brackets factors such as intention, inference, implicature, relevance and referential constraint.” I could not agree more.

I would add to his observations that both the meanings of the words and the message they are meant to convey exist only in a mind, so that one cannot abstract away from speaker and hearer and treat a text as an autonomous, self-standing object. Furthermore, as Carr (2005: 6) observes, the key element in long-duration texts in antiquity was the transmission of teachings from mind to mind and the planting of values and ideas in the hearts of the listeners: “the mind stood at the center of the often discussed oral-written interface.” This makes oral face-to-face interaction the optimal discourse mode for the passing on of such teachings, which Carr argues to be the primary form of transmission in antiquity even for sacred texts that had actually been written down. Consequently, in the case of Christ’s teachings it was far more important for Jesus to “write on the tablet of the heart” of his disciples than to commit his teachings to parchment.²

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Notes

1. Hezser (2001: 88–9) adds that, in spite of the existence of this tradition of teaching Jewish boys to read, the historical evidence does not indicate that the writing of Hebrew letters was generally taught in Jewish elementary schools, “although some Jewish children may have been instructed in writing by their parents or one or the other teacher.”

2. Another reason for Jesus not writing anything down is theological in import and concerns the nature of Christian revelation itself. Benedict XVI writes that “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, *a person*, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (*Deus caritas est*, no. 1) For most Christians, Jesus is God in person revealing himself to men by living and working among them, and the core truth of his preaching is an intimate revelation concerning God’s inner identity, namely that the Divinity is a Trinity of persons, and that Jesus, the Second Person of this Trinity, is the perfect knowledge that the Father has of himself, expressed not as an idea or a text, but as a Person. The fact that He never wrote anything is thus a testimony to the fact that the substance of his revelation to mankind is He Himself, a divine Person who wishes to establish a personal relationship with each human being. Stroumsa’s (2003: 156) claim that “Christianity is the only religion born with a Bible in its cradle” could therefore not be further from the truth: what was in the cradle was a baby, not a book.

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