REWRITING AND TEXTUAL FLUIDITY IN ANTIQUITY: EXPLORING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF EARLIEST CHRISTIAN LITERACY

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Whereas most scholars agree that Christianity was born before the middle of the first century AD, the earliest surviving manuscripts of early Christian literature date from almost a century later. Although these artefacts are well studied, they do not directly provide us with information about the circumstances under which the earliest, now lost, Christian documents were written. While the study of the surviving manuscripts has substantially enhanced our understanding of early Christian literacy in the period when they were written, we have to rely on our general knowledge of ancient Graeco-Roman and Jewish literacy for making inferences about the ways in which the original Christian documents of the first and early second century came into being.

In this contribution I will examine aspects of rewriting and textual fluidity in Antiquity, with the purpose of understanding the socio-cultural and psychological context of earliest Christian literacy. The terms ‘rewriting’ and ‘textual fluidity’ refer to two aspects of the same process. Rewriting means the modification of a literary text, the creation of a new version or edition of it, as well as the incorporation of (parts of) a work in a new text. It is important to note that the boundaries between these categories are not always clear-cut in actual practice, and were even less so in Antiquity. Fluidity, in turn, refers to the transformation of texts in the process of rewriting. Whereas the term ‘rewriting’ suggests a connection with the scribal medium, I will argue that the oral/aural medium played a significant role in all aspects of ancient literacy. First, I will review socio-cultural aspects of ancient literacy in an attempt to understand the origins of the phenomena of rewriting and textual fluidity. Second, I will offer some

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insights from memory studies to explain how rewriting and textual fluidity shape texts. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks about the particular factors that influenced textual fluidity in early Christianity.

**Rewriting and Textual Fluidity in Ancient Literature**

In order to gain some basic insights about the *Sitz im Leben* of rewriting in Antiquity, we first have to take a look at how books were written and read in the Ancient world. In most of Jewish and Graeco-Roman Antiquity, books circulated on a random and occasional basis. As Raymond Starr has demonstrated, reviewing a wealth of evidence especially from the Roman world, networks of friends and acquaintances constituted by far the most important channel for releasing, acquiring or borrowing books. Authors could deposit their books in libraries or bookstores, and bookstores made exemplars mainly on demand. In general, however, authors had no control over their work, which might have slipped out of their hands in a draft version or could be modified without their knowledge, while new works easily appeared under their names and without their knowledge or consent. Appeals or warnings not to change the text are found in various sources, a well-known example being Revelation 22:18–19:

> I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

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4 Starr, “Circulation of Literary Texts”.


7 Translation after NRSV. The passage has been interpreted as a ‘canonization formula’ (W. Bousset and H. Gressmann, *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen*