

**From Scroll to Book to Net: The Web of Knowledge**  
**By The Very Rev. Dr. John Behr**  
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At the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche uttered those words which have haunted much of the twentieth century: “God is dead” (*The Gay Science* – 1882-7; then *Thus Spoke* ...). It no doubt says a lot about him, Christianity in Switzerland in the late nineteenth century, and so on; but it also gave rise to many philosophical trends in the twentieth century, and even theological trends, especially through the course of the twentieth century – especially with all the traumas of the previously unimagined horrors of world wars and the Holocaust.

There must be something about the *fin-de-siècle* culture that prompts such grandiose statements, for at the end of the twentieth century, we began to hear predictions and rumors about another death – the death of the book. New technology was making possible innovations that seemed to herald the demise of a bastion of culture. With the introduction over the last decade of tablets, e-readers of all kinds, sophisticated phones (and now watches), the publishing industry is in turmoil (and its demise is also rumored) and a sea-change in culture is apparently underway, with children no longer having the pleasure of holding a physical book, and learning the discipline of reading from the first word to the last, in a linear manner, but rather skipping around all over the place as they surf the net.

There is, of course, an abundance of articles, op-ed pieces, books, studies, and so on, examining this change. But there is precious little theological reflection on this change and its implications. For theological implications there indeed are. Perhaps even the two much-spoken-about demises – God is dead and the book is dead – are related, or at least have significant impact on each other.

For, after all, Christianity (along with Judaism and Islam) is often described as a “religion of the book.” That statement, however, is not quite true, or is perhaps more true (though in a different way), than is often supposed. What I would like to do is reflect on it a bit, and then offer some comments on the implications of new publishing technology.

#### **From Scroll to Codex**

Christianity is not simply a book; in fact, it seems that the book was born with Christianity. Prior to the birth of Christianity, and in fact for centuries thereafter, the primary medium for all high literature, official document, and especially sacred scriptures, was the scroll. Students certainly learnt to write on wax or slate tablets, and eventually papyrus; whereas all serious literature was written on a scroll. Papyrus, was a thin paper-like material made from the pith of the papyrus plant, primarily in Egypt, had been in use since the third millennium BC: it was relatively cheap and easy to produce, but fragile – it could not be folded, and so longer texts were written on a scroll. Writing on animal skins was known to Herodotus in the fifth century BC, but it was really only in the second and first century BC that the technique used to produce parchment was perfected in Pergamon. As prices for papyrus rose, due to over-harvesting along the Nile, parchment became ever more popular.

We begin to hear of parchment “notebooks”, as it were, only in the first century AD. When the Apostle Paul, in 2 Tim 4:13, asks: “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books (τὰ βιβλία), and above all the parchments (τὰς μεμβράνας)” – the first time almost certainly refers to scrolls, and the latter term, his “note-books”, used for personal jottings. That he has to use a Latin loan word is a clear indication that it was the Romans (always the practical ones) who thought about putting parchment skins together into a notebook form (as wax tablets had also previous been joined together to form “books”): the predecessor of the codex. The first unmistakable reference to literary production in codex form comes from Martial (probably AD 84–86:

You who are anxious that my books should be with you everywhere, and desire to have them as companions on a long journey, buy a copy of which the parchment leaves are compressed into a small compass (*quos artat brevis membrana tabellis*) (Epigrams 1.2)

Such works might be acceptable for taking on a journey (as we today might use a Kindle or some such), but no self-respecting cultured person would ever think that they could be a replacement for the scroll.

As Colin Roberts and T. C. Skeat put it in their classic work, *The Birth of the Codex*:

In the first two centuries of the Empire polite society acknowledged one form and one form only for the book – the roll. Such was the force of convention that even when the codex was in common use for books, Augustine feels obliged to apologize for writing a letter in codex form (*ep.* 171), and Jerome, who remembers that he is a gentleman as well as a scholar, writes his letters correctly on rolls, even though he keeps his books in codices.

It was not until the third century that the codex gained any sizable share in the book production market, and not until the fourth century that it gained parity with the scroll (*Birth*, 37). In the second century, it is barely visible at all amongst pagan or secular books. Even later, when the codex begins to dominate, the roll or scroll remained the most authoritative and official record of choice – especially clear in England, with the Patent Rolls, a series of administrative records compiled in the English Chancery beginning at the dawn of the thirteenth century and continuing all the way to the present day (still called that, though no longer rolls).

This is, however, in stark contrast to the way Christians reproduced their sacred scriptures. From the remains that we have, it is unambiguously clear that, from the beginning of the second century onwards, Christians reproduced their scriptures in the codex form. To quote Roberts, again:

when the Christian Bible first emerges into history the books of which it was composed are always written on papyrus and are always in codex form.

There could not be a greater contrast in format with the non-Christian book of the second century, a contrast all the more remarkable when we recall that Egypt, where all these early Christian texts were found, was the country where the papyrus roll originated and where the status of the roll as the only acceptable format for literature was guaranteed by Alexandria with its dominating position in the world of books. (*Birth*, 42)

Indeed so universal is the Christian use of the codex in the second century that its introduction must date well before AD 100. It is, moreover, significant for the history of the early Church that Christian book-production methods should have severed themselves from Jewish so completely and at so early a date: that Christians transcribed the books of the Septuagint onto codices illustrates how complete that severance was. (*Birth*, 45)

This really is a remarkable phenomenon: the birth of the codex (the modern book) and the birth of Christianity go together! Roberts considers the various suggestions that have been made regarding why the codex should have caught on so rapidly and in such a wholesale manner – such as economy, compactness, comprehensiveness, convenience, and ease of reference – and finds them all unsatisfactory.

Skeat suggested that the reason for the wholesale adoption of the codex around the year 100 AD was the appearance of the Gospel of John, setting the seal, as it were, on the production of Gospels – these four, conveniently bound together, and no more! It appears that we do in fact have a remains four-fold Gospel codex from early in the second century; and it is likely that the letters of the apostle Paul were also collected together in a similar manner (St Ignatius of Antioch mentions the “letters of the apostle” in a manner that might imply he knew them as a collection).

Whatever the reasons, which are no lost to history, it remains a fact that the birth of Christianity and the birth of the codex go together.

It is also interesting to note that this adoption of a specific and new mode of book production was paralleled by the adoption of a new typological phenomenon: the use of *sacra nomina* – certain divine names and words, particularly θεός, κύριος, Ἰησοῦς and Χριστός, written in contraction and marked by a superscript line (as on icons). Roberts:

This, like the exclusive employment of the codex form, is strictly a Christian usage unknown to Jewish or pagan manuscripts, and since its existence is taken for granted in a reference in the Epistle of Barnabas it must go back if not to the Apostolic age, at least to the Sub-Apostolic Age.

Given that the introduction of new technology has also facilitated the abbreviation of words and the introduction of other phenomenon (emojicons etc), perhaps the two are related!

### Opening the Book

If the connection between the birth of Christianity and the birth of the codex is a historical phenomenon, what is even more important, theologically speaking, is not just the adoption of a new form of book-production, but the opening of the book, the book that had been sealed, in the revelation effect by Christ and that is Christ – an apocalypse, a revelation of a mystery hidden from all eternity, sealed in a closed book. (NB in this case, "Scripture" refers to the "Old Testament")

That this would happen is already spoken of by the prophet Daniel:

[Dan 12.1] "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book. [2] And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. [3] And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. [4] But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase."

One can find many parallels to these words, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Enoch literature and so on. But its definitive place is established for Christianity by the book called the Apocalypse:

#### Rev. 5

[1] And I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals; [2] and I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" [3] And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, [4] and I wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to into it. [5] Then one of the elders said to me, "Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." [6] And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; [7] and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. [8] And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; [9] and they sang a new song, saying,

"Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, [10] and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth."

[11] Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, [12] saying with a loud voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

[13] And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying,

"To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!"

[14] And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

The same point is made in many other ways: such as the veil over Moses' face as he descends from his encounter with God on Mount Sinai, which the apostle Paul refers to the veil which lies over the minds of those who read Moses without seeing the glory of God revealed in the face of Christ, who alone removed the veil (2 Cor 3:2–4:7); or the dullness of the minds of the disciples as they accompanied the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, before Christ "opened the scriptures" to them (Luke 24:32).

All these images are brought together beautifully by St Irenaeus in his description of how to read the Scriptures:

#### St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* 4.26.1:

If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures this way, he will find in them the Word concerning Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling. For Christ is the "treasure which was hidden in the field" [Matt 13:44], that is, in this world – for "the field is the world" [Matt 13:38] – [a treasure] hidden in the Scriptures, for he was indicated by means of types and parables, which could not be understood by men prior to the consummation of those things which had been predicted, that is, the advent of the Lord. And therefore it was said to Daniel the prophet, "Shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the consummation, until many learn and knowledge abounds. For, when the dispersion shall be accomplished, they shall know all these things" [Dan 12:4, 7]. And Jeremiah also says, "In the last days they shall understand these things" [Jer 23:20]. For every prophecy, before its fulfillment, is nothing but an enigma and ambiguity to men; but when the time has arrived, and the prediction has come to pass, then it has an exact exposition (ἐξήγησις). And for this reason, when at this present time the Law is read by the Jews, it is like a myth, for they do not possess the explanation (ἐξήγησις) of all things which pertain to the human advent of the Son of God; but when it is read by Christians, it is a treasure, hid in a field, but brought to light by the cross of Christ, and explained, both enriching the understanding of men, and showing forth the wisdom of God, and making known his dispensations with regard to man, and prefiguring the kingdom of Christ, and preaching in anticipation the good news of the inheritance of the holy Jerusalem, and proclaiming beforehand that the man who loves God shall advance so far as even to see God, and hear his Word, and be glorified, from hearing his speech, to such an extent, that others will not be able to behold his glorious countenance [cf. 2 Cor 3:7], as was said by Daniel, "Those who understand shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and many of the righteous as the stars for ever and ever" [Dan 12:3]. In this manner, then, I have shown it to be, if anyone read the Scriptures.

#### Synchronic and Diachronic Reading

"If anyone read the Scriptures ..."

So, we move from questions of book production to questions of reading.

The apocalyptic opening of the Scriptures is intimately tied to the two distinct, but related, ways in which Scripture, as a book, is read.

On the one hand, Scripture is read in a linear manner, from beginning to end; this is, of course, nothing new, it is shared with the way a scroll would be read, though, importantly, that is the only practical way of reading a scroll. This is sometimes also called a diachronic reading (i.e. through time). I will return to this linearity later.

On the other hand, Scripture is also read "synchronically" – together, taking all the books of the Scriptures, now opened by Christ, as speaking about Christ: [Luke 24:27] "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."

Already, in writing their Gospels, the Evangelists continually draw upon passages, images, phrases, from the Scriptures to present Christ and his activity: This was done that that might be fulfilled.

This way of reading Scripture – typologically, allegorically (it doesn't really make any difference which term one uses)—became the mainstay of Christian reading of Scripture.

For instance, Melito of Sardis, around the year 170 AD:

(*On Pascha* 59) Thus if you wish to see the mystery of the Lord look at Abel who is likewise slain,  
at Isaac who is likewise tied up,  
at Joseph who is likewise traded,  
at Moses who is likewise exposed,  
at David who is likewise hunted down,  
at the prophets who likewise suffer for the sake of Christ.

Orthodox hymnography continues this in an endless interplay of poetic intertextuality.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons suggests the image of a mosaic: the Scriptures are like the precious jewels making up a mosaic, which when looked at allow us to see the image of the king; but his opponents (the so-called Gnostics) have rearranged the tiles to produce a picture of a fox or a dog (and, Irenaeus adds, rather a bad one at that!). Irenaeus continues by giving an example of Homeric centos – the playful rearrangement of lines drawn from Homer, so that the language sounds

familiar, but the story told is one not found anywhere in Homer. However, he continues, one who knows Homer is able to put the lines back in their proper place. So also, he says, one who holds to the canon of truth is able to put the parts of Scripture back in their proper place, so that the image of the King can once again be seen.

Scripture, then, is like a vast thesaurus – a treasury of imagery (words, descriptions, prophetic oracles, narratives), all of which portray Christ. Though this web of intertextuality is a feature of all literature, the adoption of the codex undoubtedly facilitated the ease by which Scripture could be endlessly cross-referenced. And, one would hope, the world-wide-web takes this intertextuality to an unprecedented level: allowing us to cross-reference almost the whole of human history and culture at the click of button.

But the thesaurus (treasury) of the Christian book (the bible) does not lack order, coherence, and cohesion – it is not a free-floating play of intertextuality. Irenaeus, as I just mentioned, points to the need for a canon or criterion in its reading. And here the synchronic mode of reading, which I have been discussing, intersects with the diachronic or linear mode mentioned briefly earlier.

The one who appears at the end, Christ himself, to open the book and show how they all speak of him,  
is in fact the beginning (Adam is only, as Paul says, 'a type of the one to come', that is, already stamped in his image);  
all things begin with him and are oriented towards their fulfillment in him  
the Beginning who only appears at the end, as Irenaeus puts it,  
but the end which enables us to read from the beginning onwards with meaning.

The Christian book, the Bible, is not a free-floating play of images, nor is a record of an on-going, open-ended history, whose last chapters have yet to be written: it is a complete account, determined teleologically, that is, from the end, in which we find out place and meaning.

### The World

But before turning to the question of meaning, it is also worth noting that the centrality of the book in Christianity, in the ways described, also facilitated seeing the whole of creation in a similar manner.

The parallel is made explicitly by St Ephrem the Syrian:

In his book Moses described  
the creation of the natural world  
so that both Nature and Scripture  
might bear witness to the Creator:  
Nature, through man's use of it,  
Scripture, through his reading of it;  
they are the witnesses  
which reach everywhere,  
they are to be found at all times,  
present at every hour,  
confuting the unbeliever  
who defames the Creator. (*Hymns on Paradise*, V.2)

It is the symbols and types that they contain, both Nature and Scripture point to God.

That they are to be found everywhere, is simply a result of their having been created by God himself: they are pointers to his existence and his creative activity:

Wherever you turn your eyes, there is God's symbol,  
whatever you read, there you will find His types. (*Hymns on Virginity*, 20.12).

Or as Ephrem puts it, even more vividly:

Creation gives birth to Christ in symbols,  
as Mary did in the flesh.  
(*Hymns on Virginity*, 6.8)

These types and symbols convey a sense of the interconnectedness of creation and Scripture, and of the fact that everything is filled with meaning. Since all these types and symbols point to some aspect of divine reality, their presence in Scripture and Nature, brings the presence of God into the whole of the natural world as well as the Scriptures. Everything is *potentially* theophanic - everything is potentially sacramental.

### Meaning

In these ways, the reading of the book and the world enable us to find meaning.

We find meaning in the vast web of knowledge in which we find ourselves – and, today, that much more extensively.

But this meaning is also intrinsically tied to the linear mode of reading.

For even if the Christian Book, the Bible, as I mentioned earlier, is a complete account, determined teleologically,  
we mere mortals are historical beings, caught in the middle, and with our ends before us.

Although almost half-a-century old, Frank Kermode's classic study, *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), has much to offer us here:

He notes the point I made about the intersection of the synchronic and diachronic features of Scripture and its reading:

The Bible is a familiar model of history. It begins in the beginning ('In the beginning...') and ends with a vision of the end ('Even so, come, Lord Jesus'); the first book is Genesis, the last Apocalypse. Ideally, it is a wholly concordant structure, the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end. The end, Apocalypse, is traditionally held to resume the whole structure, which it can only do by figures predictive of that part of it which has not been historically revealed. (p.6–7)

However, as he goes on to point out:

Men, like poets, rush 'into the midst' *in media res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths. (p.7)

And as he asks: "what human need can be more profound than to humanize the common death?" (p.7). We, as human beings, live by constructing meaning: "Men in the midst make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle." (p.17)

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### The loss of linear reading – loss of meaning?

I suggested earlier that the development of new technology – the web, new ways of reading books, new ways of reading – might in fact increase our appreciation for synchronic intertextuality, opening up for us infinitely greater resources for entering into the all-encompassing mystery that is Christ.

But what about linear reading – diachronic reading, not just in the sense of the reading of a history through time, but taking time with texts, reading from line to line, from beginning to end of any given text, and not just a teleologically driven linear reading, but any linear reading?

Recent studies seem to show that recent changes in textual media (from printed books to digital platforms) are beginning to cause not only changes in reading habits, but actual physiological changes in our brain, the development of what is called a "bi-lateral brain": the parts of the brain in which the slow process of reading a text from beginning to end are quite different from the parts of the brain that are engaged when we pursue a "non-lateral" reading, with our eyes darting around a screen, clicking on words that take us to other pages in an apparently endless play of cross-reference. The increased demands of decision-making (whether to stay on this page or jump to another) and visual processing (the bombardment of diverse images on any page) leads overall, researchers conclude, to an impaired reading comprehension. Even in formats more supposedly akin to a book (rather than a webpage), studies have demonstrated that e-readers are significantly less able to recall the order of events in the story just read than physical book readers.

Such findings can easily be multiplied, and, of course, equally be debated, but it is undeniable that changes are underfoot. WNYC, whose program "New Tech City" recently ran a program on this question, with the title "The 'Bi-Literate' Brain: The Key to Reading in a Sea of Screens," put as a subheading on its webpage: "The deathblow to paper novels isn't economic, its biology."

If that is so, then there are in fact, I have suggested, much more at stake than simply trends in publishing, the survival of the physical book-publishing industry, and the continuance of the physical book for those who cherish holding a physical book, turning its pages, and smelling the crispness of a new book or the mustiness of an ancient tome.

At stake may be our ability to have any sense of meaning,  
as we find ourselves, as we always will, "in the midst", thrown into life in the middle of the course of history and moving towards our death;  
as we swim in an ever wider web or world of endless intertextuality... or sink;  
as we no longer know how to, or are no longer even able to, find our place in the Book of Christianity and the World as God's creation;  
In short, the much discussed "death of the book" might very well be connected to the "death of God". Or, perhaps, just another passing *fin de siècle* phenomenon!