

“The Public Reading of Scripture in the Early Church in the Church of Today”

A presentation given at an ESEPA conference in April 2021. The original Spanish version is found on my other blog under the title “La Lectura Oral de las Escrituras en la Iglesia Primitiva y en la Actualidad.”

SUMMARY: IN THE EARLY CHURCH, EXTENSIVE ORAL SCRIPTURE READING WAS A NECESSITY DUE TO THE HIGH ILLITERACY IN THE CHURCH (1 TIM 4:13; REV 1:3; JUSTIN MARTYR, *FIRST APOLOGY* 67; MURATORIAN CANON; TERTULLIAN, *APOLOGY* 39). TODAY THE GLOBAL LITERACY RATE IS AROUND 86% FOR ADULTS AND 91% FOR NON-ADULTS. THE CHURCH TACITLY ASSUMES THAT BELIEVERS WILL READ THE BIBLE DURING THE WEEK, AND THAT READINGS IN WORSHIP CAN BE MINIMIZED, PICKED AT RANDOM, AND LIMITED TO FAMILIAR TEXTS. WE WILL ARGUE THAT THE OLD PRACTICE IS STILL NECESSARY, EVEN IN A TIME OF WIDESPREAD LITERACY.

Introduction

Paul gave Timothy this charge: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” 1 Tim 4:13 NIV

I would ask you please, to take a few seconds and think about that phrase, “the public reading of Scripture.” In the last church meeting that you attended: apart from the sermon, what Bible texts do you remember that someone read to the congregation? And what impact did they make on the hearers?

I pose the question: Paul says “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture”; from what we witness today, do we see that same level of dedication, of devotion, of commitment to reading substantial portions the Bible out loud during meetings of the church in our time?

My theme is “The Public Reading of Scripture in the Early Church and in the Church of Today.” And I did not realize this when I picked this topic, how popular is the theme in recent days. In fact, most of my resources were written in the 21st century, and a new book by Justo González came out so recently that I could not access it in time.

I. Public Bible reading in the Early Church

The meetings of the apostolic church included extensive readings of Scripture. One reason for this was the low rate of literacy among Christians. Perhaps as few as 10 or 15% of the believers at Philippi or Ephesus or Rome were literate.

And as late as 1820, only about 12% of the global population could read. The literacy rate worldwide has shot up since then: according to UNICEF it now stands around 86% for adults and 91% for the non-adults (World Atlas). And even if a person cannot read, he or she can listen to recordings of books, including the Bible. So, there has never been a better time to be a reader with the eyes or with the ears!

In the first century, if you were not literate, you had to actually have a human being present to read to you.

Let's consider how this was expressed in the broader **Greco-Roman culture**. Public speeches, readings or recitations were common for entertainment and for personal enrichment. After all, there were no television or movies. So you might go to the amphitheater for a show, or if you are rich man, you might give a banquet, typically for eight other men. After the food and wine, you might have a *symposium*, where a musician would play or sing, or you might listen to someone read or recite some literature. Often this was a slave who had received special training in reading and performance. It was all dramatized with gestures and vocal tones. One of the most popular works was the Aeneid of Virgil, 19 BC, written in Latin. It told of the founding of Rome and the fierce anger of the goddess Juno. Just try and picture someone giving a dramatic recitation:

O Muse! the causes and the crimes relate;
What goddess was provok'd, and whence her hate;
For what offense the Queen of Heav'n began
To persecute so brave, so just a man;
Involv'd his anxious life in endless cares,
Expos'd to wants, and hurried into wars!
Can heav'nly minds such high resentment show,
Or exercise their spite in human woe?

These were stories and poems which not only entertained, but also formed the thinking of Roman men who heard it together: *this is where we came from, this is who we are, these are our values, this is what we aspire to do!*

Second Temple Judaism, the cradle of the early church

The literacy rate among Jewish males was higher than their Greek counterparts; they did not use Hebrew in daily life, but Jesus and his brothers and the apostles learned it in the synagogue school. There were readings in the temple, synagogues, and elsewhere. Rabbis had their own scrolls. They also developed their memories, as Shammai said, "I have two copies of Torah – one in writing and one in my mind" (b. Shabbat 31a, Babylonian Talmud). Some wealthier people also had access, for example the Ethiopian eunuch was reading from Isaiah (Acts 8:30) and Philip heard him as he read aloud. Each synagogue had an "ark" where the scrolls were protected and taken out for reading and study, even daily (Acts 17:11): the Bereans "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

It is not clear if this was the custom in New Testament times, but eventually the rabbis set up a formal schedule. They would read (or chant) in a cycle of one or three years the Law of Moses. The weekly portion was the "parashah" – each one has its own special name, the first word of the reading. The parashah was followed by the "haftarah", which was an appropriate reading from

the prophets.¹ For this Sabbath (24 April 2021) the reading is called *Acharé*, four chapters of Leviticus 16:1-20:27²; the Haftarah is two chapters of Ezekiel. Acts 13:15 thus reflects the normal liturgical reading of the Scriptures in each Sabbath meeting. “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak.’” There is an inscription from an ancient ruin of a synagogue in Jerusalem that says, “this is a place of gathering for the reading of the Torah”, συναγωγήν εἰς ἀνάγνωσιν νόμου, see BDAG). The Bible played many roles: reading, preaching, and perhaps surprising to us – dialogue and debate, as both Josephus and Philo describe. Gentiles could listen, standing outside at the door or window. We know that Timothy from infancy knew the Scriptures (2 Tim 3:15), but this came from his pious mother and grandmother, almost certainly not by memory, not by reading from their own copy.

There are a few hints that other gentiles had copies of the Scriptures in Greek – in the library of Alexandria and maybe earlier, in the 4th century earlier BC – although they may be mythical (Shogren, pp. 709-710).

The first Christian century

The traditional viewpoint is that the Christian meetings followed generally the order of the synagogue (see Harnack; Mounce; Towner; Marshall & Towner; Johnson; with qualifications, McGowan): worship, confession, Scripture reading, exposition. Some differences would be the greater participation of women and of course the Lord’s Supper. Recently, others suggest that the church was influenced more by the Greco-Roman *symposia* (Ailikin), or from both Jewish and Greek contexts: Millard traces out a large number of references to Greek, Jewish, and Christian communal readings; so too does Wright. But given that Christian meetings were attended solely or predominantly by Jewish Christians for many years, it is more likely that the synagogue provided the pattern.

We are not given many details about the church meeting in apostolic times, but to gain some insight, let’s return to our key verse: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” (1 Tim 4:13 NIV)

Calvin said that this verse referred to private, individual study of the Scriptures by Timothy and by extension all preachers: “How shall pastors teach others if they be not eager to learn? And if so great a man is advised to study to make progress from day to day, how much more do we need such an advice? Woe then to the slothfulness of those who do not peruse the oracles of the Holy Spirit by day and night, in order to learn from them how to discharge their office!” The problem with that exegesis is that the word “reading” (*anagnōsēs*) cannot be literally translated simply as “reading” in English, because it did not refer to the same activity as it does today. If I tell you “I

¹ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/weekly-torah-readings>

² <https://www.mechon-mamre.org/mp3/t0316.mp3>; *acharé* = “after”, named for the beginning of the parashah: “after the death of Aaron’s two sons.”

have read this novel”, you would assume that I read it in private. The word used here implies that it really means: “read the Bible, out loud”, that is, to the congregation; “publicly” as in the NIV; or as the NLT has it, “focus on reading the Scriptures *to the church*” (thus Towner; Marshall & Towner; Johnson; Mounce). And of course, “the Scriptures” still refers to the Old Testament in the Greek version the Septuagint.

We have an excellent example of this dynamic of single reader/many hearers in Rev 1:3 – “Blessed is *the one who reads aloud* the words of this prophecy, and blessed are *those who hear* it and take to heart what is written in it.” The reading of this book was an aural experience, “aural” meaning “having to do with hearing.”

Another use of the Scriptures in the house churches (as in the synagogues) would be, singing psalms, learned by memory: so someone could suggest, *Let’s sing “The Lord is King”*, what we would call Psalm 98. As Paul says: “singing to one another with psalms, etc.” (Eph 5:20)

Copies of books were expensive, even if you could read; this leads Harnack to conclude that “for a considerable period of time [private reading] was somewhat infrequent, simply because of the lack of copies. This explains why mention is never made of the private reading in the New Testament, nor in the Didache or in the Epistle of Barnabas. (Harnack, p. 33) So for the great majority of Christians, Bible study between meetings would mean, reviewing and rehearsing what you heard on Sunday and perhaps memorized.

We can illustrate this another way: a scroll of the Old Testament or an epistle or gospel or Revelation is not something you take and read in private at your desk; it is a “script” that someone uses to read to the group. To think in modern terms: suppose your church has a Braille copy of 1 John, but in your group of 50 or 100 Christians, only one or two people know Braille: to the majority it is just a roll of paper with dots that mean nothing. So, the “literate” person runs his fingers, and from fingers to brain to throat and mouth he “produces” the sound that he “transmits” to the illiterate. Thus, the group reception of the reading is absolutely vital, since all hear the same text at the same time – it is the local body that processes it, as one. So, when John sent his letter to the churches of Asia Minor, one would read it aloud, the others would absorb it together.³

Its practice in the second Christian century

Christians could not buy the New Testament in a bookstore but would need to get handmade copies.⁴ Let’s move into the second century. I am going to cite three authors – Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Tertullian – who describe church meetings that, while more formal, would still

³ For example, 1 John 1 – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iMvZs4wRjE>

⁴ Surprisingly enough, the handwriting quality of the very oldest manuscripts of the New Testament is higher than the average book of the second and third centuries (Hixson & Gurry, pp. 132-151).

have been recognizable to believers of the first century. First, Clement of Rome in his Epistle to the Corinthians, a very long letter, written about AD 96. He constantly refers to 1 Corinthians, a letter that 40 years earlier rebuked the church for its divisions; this shows that he knows 1 Corinthians, that he knows that they know the epistle, and that the Corinthians know that he knows it! That is, they have a shared text, which he can quote, and they inhabit the same universe, and Clement can exhort and rebuke them for their *current* divisions. He can also state that “For you know, and know well, the sacred Scriptures, dear friends, and you have searched into the oracles of God. We write these things, therefore, merely as a reminder,” going on to quote Exodus, Deuteronomy, the Psalms (1 Clement 53, Holmes, p. 88). More and more the churches read books of the New Testament, and Harnack demonstrates, as the church moved into the second century, it seems assumed that Christians know both Testaments (pp. 38-47). And that isn’t the limit: when Aristides writes his *Apology* cap. 16 (more or less the year 125), he invites the emperor Hadrian to take up the books written by Christians to confirm that Aristides is speaking the truth about them; but of course, he is speaking to an individual for whom money is no object! (ANF vol. 9, p. 278). Also, the pagan philosopher Justin Martyr was converted (around 132) after someone suggested that he read the Old Testament prophets: Justin was impressed by their fulfillment in Christ (*Dialogue with Trypho*, ANF vol. 1, p. 199); and around that time, the rabbi Trypho claims to have read Christian Scriptures: “Moreover, I am aware that your precepts in the so-called Gospel are so wonderful and so great, that I suspect no one can keep them; for I have carefully read them” (vol. 1, p. 199). Later, the philosopher Celsus (c. 175) boasts about the Christian Scriptures that he “is acquainted with all our doctrines” (Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.12, ANF vol. 4, p. 401); Origen says that he doubts that Celsus has perused the Old or New Testament, but this is because of Celsus’s ignorance, not because the texts would have been unavailable to him.

Let’s examine some of the first-hand references to *congregational* Scripture reading (see also McGowan).

Justin Martyr, *First apology* 67 (ANF vol. 1, p. 186) (c. AD 155) – And on the day called Sunday,¹ all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles [New Testament, perhaps specifically the gospels] or the writings of the prophets [Old Testament] are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

The Canon of Muratori (fragment), perhaps as early as the late 2nd century. It is a list of books accepted for reading in the meetings of the Church. For example, it uses the language: “We accept only the Apocalypses of John and of Peter, although some of us do not want it to be read in the Church.” The key terms are the Latin *legi in ecclesia* (“read in

¹ τῆ τοῦ Ἡλίου λεγομένη ἡμέρα, “the day called ‘of the sun’”.

church”), or received or not, or accepted or not. Thus the Shepherd of Hermas is listed as suitable for private reading: “it should indeed be read, but it cannot be published for the people in the church.”

Tertullian, *Apology* 39.3 (ANF, vol. 3, p. 46, AD 197) – We assemble to read our sacred writings, if any peculiarity of the times makes either forewarning or reminiscence needful. However it be in that respect, with the sacred words we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we make our confidence more stedfast; and no less by inculcations of God’s precepts we confirm good habits. In the same place also exhortations are made, rebukes and sacred censures are administered.

That is, the Scripture readings interpret to us, as a group, who we are. Tertullian also mentions that the Christian meeting includes the reading of Scriptures, the chanting of psalms, the preaching of sermons, and prayers (Tertullian, *On the soul* 9, ANF, vol. 3, p. 188)

Its social function

We have said that any kind of public reading or recitation will affect the listeners on several levels. Most superficially, in the Greek culture, it was entertainment. It was also educational, and schoolboys would memorize passages to recite. But a deeper aim was to draw together the listeners: when you heard how Aeneas founded the Roman people, you were being told that, *You Romans are destined to be the masters of the world; so how should you live, what is your duty to the empire?* In that same poem, Julius Caesar and Augustus Cesar are shown to be descendants of Aeneas, and so there is political propaganda, which was meant to re-unite a divided Rome under one family of rulers.

The reading of Scripture includes all of this: when you hear the book of Ruth read aloud, it tells you how pious men and women should behave, dedicated wholly to Yahweh and to his law; it talks about a generous and kind spirit; it reminds the listeners that Yahweh is attentive to our prayers and faithful to his word; and at the end, it shows that Boaz was the father of Obed, and Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. That is, God’s hand in history is taking his people from the turmoil of the time of the judges to the righteous kingdom of David.

In the Old Testament, several times there are public events known as “covenant renewals”, where the Torah is read aloud to the gathered nation, and they pledge themselves to obey it. For example, in Nehemiah 8, “So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.”

Its spiritual function

While all of these functions are true about Bible reading, we must not commit the error of reductionism, that the Bible affects us on merely a sociological level. There is another, higher aspect of the group reading of the Scriptures. In the case of the Bible, “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:14). “For it is not those who hear the law [read aloud] who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous” (Rom 2:13). And we recall that it was the synagogue, the congregations of hearers of the Torah, who constantly condemned Jesus. But for others, for the believers, “faith comes from hearing the message” (Rom 10:17^a).

II. Public Bible Reading in the Evangelical Church of Today

I have suggested that, in the early church, oral scripture reading was extended by necessity due to the high illiteracy in the church. While that urgency does not exist today, my question is whether the church tacitly assumes that believers will read the Bible during the week, and that readings in worship can therefore be minimized, picked at random, and limited to familiar texts.

So, is there still need today for the ancient practice of Bible Reading in the meeting, along with worship, prayer, offering, Lord’s Supper, teaching and preaching?

I say, without any doubt, we stand in need of public Scripture reading. Yes, we are in a culture where we tell people, “Read your Bible every day!” Or even better, “Get involved in our Bible reading plan. Here is a list of readings for the week, we are all going to read through the Bible!” And let me affirm that I think that this is not merely a good idea, but a necessary one. I cannot imagine how any believer who can read – or listen to a recording of – the Bible may hide that talent in the earth; our literacy is a way to bring God glory.

But I must also agree with Philip Towner when he says that private, individual Bible reading is not enough: “...it is doubtful that the task of identity forming, shaping, defining, and redefining will be carried out meaningfully in a community by so many individual readings by its members.” (Towner, p. 51). He goes on to point out how Western individualism leads us to say *the Bible is for me*, but missed out that it is also *for us*. Paul had to deal with this on a micro level: in a city where there were subgroups of Apollos and Cefas, where the rich put down the poor, where the strong insulted the weak and vice versa, he wrote a long epistle with the intent that the whole church would hear this, read out loud with every member attentive to it. I am heart and soul in favor of personal Bible study, obviously; but all things being equal, I cannot imagine that anyone fully experiences the Bible in private.

I would add that matters have gotten worse over the past decade, because Christian identity has now become formed, not by group reading of Scripture, but by the voices of social media. Do you know that, the average daily use of social media in the Americas is between two and three hours a day (that doesn’t include television etc.)? South America is the continent where social

media time is the highest – 3 hours and 29 minutes (Metev). A poll in the US has demonstrated that, “The only time most Americans [in the US] hear from the Bible is when someone else is reading it.” (Lifeway Research). That is, when it is being read aloud in church – if they even attend church. Compare two to three hours of social media per day with less than five minutes of Bible reading per week. This explains how, I know Christians whose “authoritative Bible” *is* social media, and even if the content includes actual Scripture, the echo chamber produces a Christianity I can no longer recognize.

I am curious as to which church groups are reading the Bible during our meetings. There is wide variety, and I asked earlier if you could remember what was read out last Sunday. Has it made an impact on you for the past five days? Here is a model we might not be familiar with: in a typical Anglican service there are at least four Scripture readings every meeting: a psalm; an OT lesson, a NT lesson from outside the gospels, and the climax is the reading from the gospels – people stand to hear this final reading. According to the calendar I consulted, this Sunday, the 25 of April 2021, the readings worldwide will include Psalm 23 and substantial sections from Nehemiah, Acts, 1 John, and Gospel of John.⁵

To mention the Catholic church, I am told that there are at a minimum two readings during every mass – in 2021 they are reading through the whole Gospel of Mark.

It is the evangelical in me that cries out that, I want *our* meetings to impress the visitor with how much we honor the Bible. But some of our practice is a far cry from Paul’s “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture”; or Justin Martyr’s church experience, where the Scripture is read “as long as time permits”, and later, when the reader has finished, there is a sermon.

What impression does it make if we save time by cutting out Bible reading; or if the reader mispronounces words, or and does not seem to understand what the passage is about. As one recent guide to worship warns, *The worship architect*, it is the the lazy and proud person tries to do Scripture reading without the necessary preparation; and that those who are not willing to devote their energy to it should leave the task for those who do (Cherry, ch. 5). Or, what does it communicate or if only the pastors or worship leaders do all of Scripture reading; or if people mainly read well-known passages – favorite psalms; Worthy is the Lamb in Rev 5; if the listener does not get the impression that the reader has thought about the text during the week, studied it, prayed over it, read it out loud? Of as we have all witnesses, what impression does it make when they stand up to read, but the microphone doesn’t work, and they have to change it out – you only notice the sound system when it distorts God’s message to us!

⁵ Just a casual observation: an Anglican sermon is short by evangelical standards. By a very rough estimate, the sermon is, in minutes perhaps only 2 or 3 times the length of the combined Bible readings. I have been in evangelical churches, where the sermon is, easily, 50 times the length of the Bible readings.

How Then Do We Receive Together the Grace of God in his Word? I will offer five suggestions.

One. We need to learn how to listen, with our ears; it is a discipline. Now, from my childhood, we were told every participant must have his own Bible open to the passage during the reading – “Is everybody there? Amen?” “Amen!” Some years ago, I realized that when I had my Bible open, my eyes wandered, and I missed the message. Now I sit with my Bible closed and my eyes shut. Or, using the projector is a good alternative, since we will literally be on the same page, and looking up.

Two. We need to listen as a group. Sometimes, as a parent, I would take one child or another to one side and speak to them about some issue. But there are other times when a father has to say, “Okay, time for a family meeting!” because everyone needs to hear the same thing in the same way at the same time. Paul knew, as I said, that all the Corinthians needed to hear the word together; it is not so clear in English, but he uses plural verbs: “So whether you [plural, “all of you”] eat or drink or whatever you [plural] do, do [plural] it all for the glory of God. Do not cause [plural] anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow [plural] my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Cor 10:32-11:1) If I read that as an individual, I might think of brother so-and-so, and how he needs to stop making others stumble. But in a group meeting, hearing that, I might get the uncomfortable feeling that people are glancing at me when they hear “do not cause anyone to stumble.”

Three. We need to interpret as we read. This means that the reader must know the passage well. In the early church times, public reading was a presentation, not to show off, but to give its sense. I just attended a funeral and heard 1 Cor 15:51 read well and with a sense of its meaning – “*We* will not all sleep, but *we* will all be changed... Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm [all these statements with the plural]. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” And I heard other Christians say, *Yes, Amen.*

Paul told Timothy to “stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God’s work—which is by faith... They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm” (1 Tim 1:3-4, 7) That is, the false teachers were Bible readers and teachers, with a twisted interpretation of, some suggest, the book of Genesis, maybe who have special small groups to get the secret knowledge. One solution to them is that the church needs to hear Timothy, dedicated to reading the Bible to them, as a whole group.

Four. We need to read the Scripture in a way that informs. Some of you might know the name of James Boice, of Tenth Presbyterian Church; when I lived in Philadelphia I sometimes attended there. Every Sunday morning there as an expository sermon, through Romans perhaps, or

Genesis. But in addition, he would every week read a chapter of the Bible, giving maybe a 5-minute description of its background and what it meant in context. In fact, some of his “Bible Readings” were as meaty as sermons I have heard!

Five. We need to treat the reading of Scripture as a serious calling. Many churches, from around the year 200 to today, have had a special ministry called the reader or the lay reader.⁶ To give one example, in one denomination, men and women who want to follow this calling receive several years of part-time training in Bible, theology, pastoral ministry, ethics, counseling, church history, leadership, spirituality, before being appointed, a program that is stricter than some church’s standards for actual ordination (Training for readers, 2021). This is the strictest program I have seen; I merely mention this to show the seriousness of Bible reading to a large group: this person will be communicating God’s Word to God’s people, and it must be done right. Why not have a Bible readers group in your church, where a few people rotate over the calendar, and where someone meets with them to show them how to read, how to interpret, how to do basic Bible interpretation and so forth?

Let me finish with a quotation from C. S. Lewis, who describes how a Christian experiences the gospel, not as an individual but as a member of a group (*The Screwtape letters*, cap. 2): in every meeting a Christian should be able to conclude: “If I, being what I am, can consider that I am in some sense a Christian, why should the different vices of those people in the next pew prove that their religion is mere hypocrisy and convention?” Every aspect of the meeting should result in this: that the gospel brings us to our knees, helpless; and then raises us up, transformed and forgiven, and vitally, a member of a family. Every weekly Bible reading can and must do the same.

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⁶ The Greek church calls the office (Ἀναγνώστης, *Anagnostēs*) and Roman (Latin “lector); both simply mean “reader.” Tertullian, around AD 200, probably is the first to mention it. Cyprian in the year 250 mentions in one of his letters that there was a young man in his church who twice confessed loyalty Christ even when threatened with a martyr’s death; and even though he wasn’t the cleverest young man, Cyprian (Epistle 32) said he had appointed him to the office of *lector*, reader, to read the Bible every Sunday. He asks his friend to pray for this young man.

Traditionally, Roman Catholic lectors were always men, but now women can be lectors; Francis made official what had been an informal development in January 2021 (McElwee).

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