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The Consequences of the Increase in and the Changed Role of Letter-Writing for the Early Church

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This paper begins by showing how the Greco-Roman world moved gradually from an overtly oral culture in the sixth century BCE to a hybrid oral-written one, though the oral element was still predominate by the time of the first century CE. The knock on effect was the increase in the use of letter-writing in the culture and the concomitant increase in the different types of letters used. In this paper, I also present and explain the specific events and the changes in cultural attitudes which were the impetus to the progressively increasing role letter-writing took in the Greco-Roman period. The final section of this paper is dedicated to show how these changes were significant for the early church to fulfil its mission more efficiently.

INTRODUCTION

The first purpose of this paper is to show that the use of letter-writing progressively increased in the Greco-Roman world through to the first century CE and that the role of letter-writing changed. The second purpose of this paper is to show the consequences which the changed role and increased use of letter-writing had on the early church. To achieve the first purpose I will identify specific events which directly effected an increase in the use of letter-writing and I will show the factors which changed in the culture so that the role of writing increased in importance and use. My logic with respect to the latter is as follows. If I can show that the role of writing has increased and that there has been a movement from an oral culture to an oral-written culture then it logically follows that letter-writing will increase too because it is one of many forms of writing which existed in the ancient Greco-Roman world (others examples include speeches, artistic works, legislation, deeds etc.). In an oral culture there are certain factors and attitudes

which prohibit a culture from embracing writing and using letter-writing. But as these factors and attitudes are changed then writing and letter-writing can be embraced into the culture which, as I will show, happened in the Greco-Roman world. Initially the Greco-Roman world was predominately an oral culture with certain factors prohibiting them from moving to a written culture. But through the course of time, and because of certain events and changes in attitude, the culture began to embrace increasingly the use of writing and letter-writing. In this paper, I will begin by showing the factors which prohibited the movement towards a written culture and inhibited the use of letter-writing, followed by the factors which caused a movement towards a written culture and an increase in the use and role of letter-writing.

Factors Prohibiting Movement to a Written Culture and Use of Letter-Writing

Literacy

Thomas has shown, to define literacy is a complex matter and prone to personal subjectivity. Equally difficult is the task of ascertaining literacy rates because of the paucity of information. She postulates three definitions of literacy, ranging from the most fundamental level (e.g. ostracism[1] which required one simply to be able to write one's signature) to the 'functional' or 'craft literacy[2]' (i.e. the person has the basic understanding of reading and writing simple personal or business messages[3] and comprehension of government steles) and finally to skillful readers and writers (e.g. the rich, elite, highly educated and secretaries who were capable of reading highly stylized literary works). With these three disparate definitions, it is

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[1]Thomas, R. *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens*, p.18.

[2]Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.7.

[3]Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.11 reaches a similar conclusion.

easy to understand how literacy rates could be skewed[4]. Traditionally literacy rates have been determined by the first definition resulting in overestimated literacy rates[5].

A similar problem determining literacy rates occurs because of scholars' bias towards 'those who could write, for only they leave clear evidence of their skills'[6]. Traditionally, however, literacy is considered to mean someone can read and write. Therefore if someone can read but not write he is illiterate. But in Ancient Greece, it was partially a cultural phenomen that more people could read than write. An individual might be expected to read a manuscript but if something was needed to be written, the cultural norm was to hire a scribe. Thus literacy rates can be underestimated if an allowance for this cultural difference is not factored into the equation.

Other issues impinge on the determination of literacy. The respective populations of the different sectors and their needs within the society require consideration since, for example, a farmer would have little need to read or write anything technical to fulfill his occupation but an urban bureaucrat would. Similarly literacy rates will vary between urban and rural settings. Orality is another concomitant issue which affected the literacy rate, but due to its significance it will be addressed later in a separate section.

Harris carefully considers these issues when he concludes that the ancient world never achieved 'mass literacy' but a 'rather low level

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[4]Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, p.3-4.

[5]Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.9. From a later period, Hermeros, Petronius' Satyricon (Sat. 58.7) confirms this when he admits that he knows only 'lapidary writing' (lapidariae litterae), that is capitals of inscriptions. Youtie, H.C. Βραδέως γραφῶν: between literacy and illiteracy', Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies12 (1971) pp.239-61. Youtie cites the example of a so-called scribe who was illiterate except for the poor ability to write his own name.

[6]Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.10.

of craftsman's literacy'[7]. He postulates a literacy figure of 10% of the population[8], with the women, the lower social strata and slaves having the lowest levels. Thus literacy[9] was not widespread despite the introduction of the alphabet in the eighth century which simplified the Greek language into a comprehensible written language for the masses[10]. Though Harris has had to work with scanty information[11] his conclusions nevertheless bear out that writing was not prevelant in the ancient Greco-Roman world and the number who could actually write and read letters was minimal and thus the number of letters produced was few.

Education

The second factor prohibiting movement to a written culture was the unavailability of education for the masses. The education infrastructure for children to learn to read and write took place in the home[12]. According to Thomas[13] the formal education for these

[7]Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.61.

[8]*The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.869; Harris, W.V. *Ancient Literacy* p.13. For other works on this issue see Beard, M. *Literacy in the Roman World*, 1991; Bowman, A.K. & Woolf, G. (eds.) *Literacy and Power*, 1994.

[9]See Thomas R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, 1992 pp.8ff. who outlines some of the pitfalls in defining 'literacy'.

[10]Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.46.

[11]Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.11.

[12]The following quotation from Xenophon, *Memorabilia of Socrates*, 2.2.6 probably reflects the situation in the very early Greek world in which education took place under the parents and then later under a tutor: 'Nor does it satisfy the parents merely to feed their offspring, but as soon as the children appear capable of learning anything, they teach them whatever they know that may be of use for their conduct in life; and whatever they consider another more capable of communicating than themselves, they send their sons to him at their own expense, and take care to adopt every course that their children may be as much improved as possible'. See also Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.15-17, 48.

special skills was on an 'ad hoc' and individual basis[14] through tutors, who were possibly the forerunners of the later paidagogos (see Xen. Mem 2.2.6). Since education[15] was funded by individuals, learning to read and write was exclusive to the aristocracy and rich. It is tempting to take the opposite position based on the comments of Diodorus about the lawgiver Charondas of Catana's (circa end of 6th century):

> [Charondas sic.] laid down that all the sons of the citizens should learn letters, with the city providing the pay of the teachers; for he assumed that people without means, who could not pay fees on their own, would otherwise be cut off from the finest pursuits. For this lawgiver rated writing above other forms of knowledge and with very good reason... (Diodorus xxii. 12-13)

But Harris is correct when he writes 'but the force of this idea was never widespread...even in Greek cities, where so much was politically disputed, elementary education very seldom seems to

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[13] *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.506

[14] Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.13. 'In most places [sic. Greek and Roman World] most of the time, there was no incentive for those who controlled the allocation of resources to aim for mass literacy. Hence the institutional *lacunae* which would have impeded any movement towards mass literacy-above all, the shortage of subsidized schools, were confronted to no more than a slight extent'.

[15] Much of the education for adults took place in informal aristocratic settings, like the symposium. Poets were to a great degree considered the educators in the Archaic period (and their effect lingered into the classical period). See Aristophanes. "The Frogs." Trans. Rogers, Benjamin B. *Aristophanes*. The Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1924. 1055 'For boys a teacher at school is found, but we, the poets, are teachers of men'. Again the emphasis was upon listening not writing nor reading.

have been an important issue'[16]. Furthermore it should be noted that Charondas restricts his sphere of education to the sons of citizens which automatically prohibits girls and non-citizens of either sex to receive an education. Even if there had been a mass education system, there was no powerful motivating force, such as personal economic benefit, for parents to send their children to schools to read and write or parents teach their own children since the majority of people were in rural settings. The urgencies of agriculture necessitated using the children for the seasonal needs[17] instead which is the same problem in developing countries today.

Thus since education was limited to such a slim proportion of the populace then it follows logically that writing in general and letter-writing specifically was not widespread.

Availability of Writing Materials

The third factor prohibiting movement to a written culture and the limitation of letter-writing was the unavailability of economical writing materials. Even though the Egyptians had invented papyrus[18] as a writing material around 3000 BCE[19] it was not widely traded nor in the hands of the populace because of expense[20]. Herodotus, in his historical account of the Pelopenisian Wars, says that parchments were used because there was a scarcity of

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[16]Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.21

[17]Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.19-20

[18]See Kenyon, Fredric G. *The Palaeography of Greek Papyri* pp.14-33 for a discussion about the production and use of papyrus; and also Pestman, P.W. *The New Papyrological Primer* pp. 1ff.. Herodotus furnishes us with the first reference to Greeks using papyrus H(erodotus v.58) and it suggests it had been in use for some time. Pliny records for us much concerning the use and production of papyrus (Natural History xii. 11-13)

[19]White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.213.

[20]Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.15,46.

papyrus[21]. Other more common economical writing materials (e.g. ostraca, wood, clay tablets) were sought. But these materials were impractical since they had inadequate writing surfaces for most correspondences or they were too heavy and cumbersome to transport or the surfaces did not provide a smooth surface from which to read. A minor consideration is that there was a lack of eyeglasses[22] so that even if writing materials did exist they were not helpful to some.

Role of Personal Messengers

The fourth factor mitigating against an increased use of letter-writing was the extensive use of personal messengers. The primary medium of communication between separated parties was not written but oral using personal messengers to transmit messages. This phenomenon changed very slowly through the subsequent centuries. Messengers were usually personal slaves[23] or trusted soldiers[24] though professional messenger services existed. They were used for personal and business matters but also for political and military correspondences[25]. There were several reasons why

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[21]Cary, H. *Herodotus* v.58.

[22]Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.15. See Quintillian *Institutes* X.3.31 who refers to *visus infirmior* and thus the need to use parchment instead of wax tablets because they are easier to read.

[23]According to Chevallier, in Ptolemaic Egypt, these messengers were considered to be civil servants. see Chevallier, R. *Les Voies Romaines*, p.208. See also White, J.L. who writes 'Wealthy Roman families used slaves as couriers, and wealthy Egyptian Greeks also used special letter carriers, either servants or employees'; *The Greek Documentary Letter*, p.103.

[24]White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.215.

[25]The situation surrounding the letter in 2 Sam 11:14 is probably indicative about the aristocracy's use of and preference for personal messengers. Initially King David sends a letter (βιβλίον, 2 Sam 11:14) concerning a personal issue via Uriah to Joab the commanding officer. Joab sends a messenger with a message, giving a full verbal account of the battle

personal messengers were preferred over letters. Convenience was one reason. To communicate an oral message to a personal messenger was quicker than the time required to compose a letter[26]. Also, messengers could return more quickly when transmitting oral messages than having to wait for a letter to be written. Security was another reason for favouring personal messengers[27]. By delivering an oral message, the risk of having the message intercepted[28] by a political or personal enemy[29] and subsequently having it used

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(πάντας τοὺς λόγους τοῦ πολέμου), not a letter, which he is to share with King David (2 Sam 11:18). King David in return sends an oral message, not a letter, back to Joab via the same messenger (2 Sam 11:25). David used a letter in the first instance in order to keep the contents hidden from the messenger, Uriah, since it contained orders for his death. But interestingly, Joab and King David used oral communication for the other correspondences. A possible reason for doing so is security since these messages dealt with military operations including David's order 'to attack the city and destroy it' (2 Sam 11:25).

[26]see Kim, Chan-Hie "The Papyrus Invitation" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94:3 September (1975) pp.391-402. In the case of the written invitations in Egyptian papyri, Kim found this to be true. He concludes that 'the rarity of written invitations compared with other kinds of papyrus documents is a good proof that invitations were not usually written but carried orally by servants or messengers' (p.397)

[27]Cicero sought the use of personal messengers due to the unreliability of the postal service, which after his death was improved by Augustus, who created the '*cursus publicus*'. See Badian, E. "Postal Service." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Eds. N. G. L. Mammond and H. H. Scullard. 2nd ed. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1970. 869.

[28]This fear is reflected in *Cicero Ad Att.* IV.15.4. Cicero (106-43 BC) writes 'my letters to you being of the kind they generally are, I do not like giving them to anybody unless I can be sure that he will deliver them to you'.

[29]In some cases a letter was sent along with the messenger so that the addressee would know the authority and authenticity of the letter. Sennacherib sent a letter with his messengers to Hezekiah to authenticate his claim that he would destroy Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:9-14).

against the author was reduced[30]. It is interesting to note that even when the role of letter-writing increased during the later Ptolemaic and Roman periods, concern for security caused many to continue to use messengers to transmit important messages orally. It is for this reason, Doty concludes that the content of many later Greco-Roman letters are vague or superficial relying on a mutually trusted messenger (i.e. trusted by the addresser and addressee) to convey the more delicate matters[31].

Postal Service

There was neither a private nor public postal service by which to transport letters in the ancient Greco-Roman world, thus severely hampering the increase of letter-writing. The first postal service was likely founded further east by the Assyrians and adopted later by the Persians[32] in the sixth century BCE. It was praised for its speed and extensiveness by Herodotus[33] and Xenophon[34] and

[30]Because of this very issue Julius Caesar wrote in cipher (see Suetonius, *The Lives of Caesar*, 76).

[31]See Doty, William *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, p.2. Quite often letter-writers would end their letter telling the recipient to ask the messenger, a mutually trusted individual, to explain more fully the contents of the letter. For example, in the letter of Synesius to Theotimus (#53) he writes 'but the excellent Acacius (the carrier of this letter) knows my whole mind. He will tell you even more than I have directed him to tell you, for loves me greatly' (Doty, *Letters*, 2). Likewise in the example of the Letter of Simale to Zenon (PCol lll 6), written early March 257 BC, he concludes his letter 'The rest learn from the one who carries the letter to you. For he is no stranger to us' W(hite, *Light*, 34).

[32]White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.214. White postulates the Persians' recent precursors, the Assyrians may have begun the first one but it is only the Persian service that has conclusive support of its existence.

[33]Herodotus commenting on the speed and method of the Persian system says 'There is nothing mortal that reaches its destination more rapidly than these couriers: it has been thus planned by the Persians. They say that as many days as are occupied in the whole journey, so many horses and men are posted at regular intervals, a horse and a man being stationed at each

became the model[35] for the subsequent postal systems created by Alexander the Great, his successors (the Ptolemies in Egypt, Seleucids in central Asia) and Augustus Caesar[36]. This system was solely for government affairs[37]. The average person was dependent on the very unpredictable custom of finding a traveller going to the same place as the addressee[38]. Messages would often be lost or undelivered[39]. This risk was reduced for the aristocracy and rich because they used personal slaves or soldiers. The main problem of the earliest postal service was that it was slow due to the lack of transportation infrastructure (e.g. roads, shipping routes) and safe travel.

day's journey: neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor night, prevents them from performing their appointed stage as quick as possible. The first courier delivers his orders to the second, the second to the third, and so it passes throughout, being delivered from one to the other, just like the torch-bearing among the Greeks, which they perform in honour of Vulcan'. *Herodotus* 8.98

[34]Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.6.17-18

[35]Zilliacus, Laurin *From Pillar to Post*, p.19.

[36]Based on Suetonius' records (Suetonius, *The Deified Julius*, 57) Chevallier notes that 'Rien d'officiel n'éxistait à l'époque de César (i.e. Julius): on voit le dictateur louer des voitures pour de longs déplacements, sans doute à des collèges qui devaient s'entendre de ville à ville'. see Chevallier, R. *Les Voies Romaine* p.208. Most likely Suetonius is referring to the outer limits of the empire to which he travelled. It was in this context in which Augustus Caesar created the *cursus publicus* . Suetonius describes its mechanics and purpose in *Lives of Caesar*: Augustus, 49.

[37]Zilliacus, Laurin *From Pillar to Post*, p.21.

[38]For examples, see Winter, J.G. *Life and Letter in Papyri*, p.40, 82 and White, J.L. *Light*, p.146, 172,182,215.

[39]For examples, see Winter, J.G. *Life and Letter in Papyri*, p.40, 82 and White, J.L. *Light*, p.146, 172,182,215.

Sixth Century Philosophy

In the sixth century BCE philosophy was blooming[40] though letter-writing and written communication played minor roles for these Philosophers. One reason was that the focus of philosophers during this time was not pedagogical[41]. These early philosophers were independent thinkers attempting 'to give a rational account of the origin and existing state of the world and the powers operative within it'[42]. Their concern was not to teach the public nor to create a school *per se,* in which the philosopher would gather many students around himself to teach them philosophy, oratory and writing as the later Sophists did. Because the nature of their work was esoteric, it actually alienated them from the majority of the populace. Their ideas were not practical ones and therefore there was little need nor practice of writing down their ideas outside the immediate circle of the initiated. Indeed they did not engage in solicitation for adherents in order to support themselves[43]. In short sixth century BC philosophy was not an impetus for expanding the use of writing or developing writing skills and certainly had no positive effect on the increase of letter-writing.

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[40]Historians generally call the period prior to the fifth century BC the Pre-Socratic phase.

[41]"Sophists" *Encyclopedia Britannica* p.1002.

[42]"Philosophy" *Encyclopedia Britannica* p.743.

[43]Even though they were not concerned to find followers, inevitably some did (e.g. Pythagoras). Their number is small in comparison to the later Sophists.

Orality

Thomas defines orality as 'the extensive reliance on oral communication rather than the written word'[44]. The *modus operandi* in the ancient world was certainly an oral one. This can be clearly demonstrated from the oral preference in composition, communication and the transmission of information, tradition and literature[45].

Poetry best exemplifies the oral nature of composing literature. Poems were created spontaneously in oral form. The symposium was one outlet where these spontaneous poets would compose as they performed[46]. Only subsequent to their performance were some of these oral compositions written down. Since composition was primarily oral and because so few were published, there was a paucity of books in the archaic period. People did not sit alone to read a book leisurely rather they gathered in a group to listen to a story orally[47]. Books did become steadily more common from the

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[44]Thomas, R. 'Orality' Hornblower, Simon, and Antony Spawforth, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 1 ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 1072. Thomas also recognizes that orality is defined as the opposite of literacy.

[45]Thomas, R. 'Orality' Hornblower, Simon, and Antony Spawforth, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 1 ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 1072.

[46]For further understanding about how poets would compose in performance see Lord, A. *The Singer of Tales*, 1960. Other works about the role and nature of poetry see Gentili, B. *Poetry and its Public in Ancient Greece*, 1988 and Herington, C.J. *Poetry into Drama*, 1985.
These ancient poets were much like the rap singers found on the street corners of large American cities today performing extemporaneously for profit.

[47]A contemporary analogy in our modern culture is the choice people make to see a story through a movie instead of reading it.

fifth century BCE onwards[48] but there was still this stigma to overcome. This can be seen in Aristophanes quotation from the *The Frogs* 'everyone having a book nowadays'[49] meaning that everyone had a copy of the play on their laps while they watched the play. This quotation demonstrates a couple of things 1) that change in the performing arts culture from a purely oral one to a combination oral-written one 2) that this change was not universally acceptable particularly to the members of the performing arts academy suggesting there was an awkwardness for people to adopt the written culture into their primarily oral one.

The norm for communication was oral not written. Therefore, as was stated above, personal messengers giving oral messages were used instead of written messages. Similarly poetry and stories were heard and performed not read[50]. Even if the works were subsequently written down, rarely would they be read privately. The first recorded reference to solitary reading is found in Aristophanes *Frogs* 52 (circa 405 BCE), in which the god Dionysus has been reading Euripides' Andromeda to himself. In later Ptolemaic and Roman periods this begins to change as poetry is read in the home to the guests by the anagnostes[51]. Likewise in the political arena, it was customary that speeches were delivered orally without the aid of a written script. It is later in the fifth century BCE that Pericles (440-430 BC) is said to have been the first man to

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[48]Xenophon's (circa 400) recollection about a cargo of books lost in a shipwreck is the earliest reference to a book trade *Anabasis* 7.5.14

[49]Aristophanes *The Frogs* 1114.

[50]Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.13.

[51]"Anagnostes" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.80. Anagnostes were often educated slaves whose purpose was to entertain the master and guests at the table by reciting poetry. For later examples of anagnostes see Cicero A(tt. 1.12.4) who laments over the death of his reader Sosthenes and Nepos, *Atticus*, 13.3; 14.1.

use a written text when he spoke[52]. The preference of oral communication to written communication was due to the fact it was easier to learn to speak and quicker to use than learning to read and write. Furthermore word of mouth and public readings were the fastest means for spreading news[53] and propagating one's work[54]. People would still rather hear a written work than read it. Literacy could also be an issue here. Finally the culture valued oral speech since it was viewed as an art[55]. The value put on oratory increases through the Sophistic period and remains important throughout the Greco-Roman period.

Transmission of information, tradition or literature was done orally trusting in their acute memories[56] without using any written document. In the business world, merchants relied upon witnesses and oaths to ratify a contract not writing. Only later during the Classical period do written documents begin to be used together with human witnesses as an addition to the oral methods of ratification[57]. During this time priority was still given to the oral

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[52]Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.13; Aeschylus, *Supplices* 944-51.

[53]Thomas makes an interesting observation that even after the printing press was invented newspapers were not a regular part of life until the eighteenth century in England; *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.10.

[54]Thomas O(rality, p.4) cites Lucian's reference to Herodotus who recited his Histories to large audiences in Olympia simply because it was the most efficient and economical way (Lucian, *Herodotus*, 1-2)

[55]Quintilian defines rhetoric as *scientia bene dicendi*, 'the science of speaking well'. Quintilian. *Quintilian*. Trans. Butler, H. E. The Loeb Classical Library. Eds. E. Capps, T. E. Page and W. H. D. Rouse. London: William Heinemann, 1922. IV.15.34,38.

[56]see Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* pp.30-33 concerning the role of memory.

[57]Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.29, 35.

contract not the written one. Historical information was passed down through the ages by means of poetry until the fifth century BC, when Ancient Greece, according to Thomas, became more 'document-minded'[58]. This marked the introduction of historiography. Thomas is correct when she concludes 'in the archaic period, writing was used for private inscriptions, the first written laws and many religious purposes'[59] but not letter-writing or books.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that the ancient Greco-Roman world was predominately an oral culture[60] and that several factors kept it from embracing a written culture. Furthermore it was shown that letter-writing was not a widespread phenomenon but was exclusive to the slim populace of the rich and aristocracy. This next section will give the factors which created a movement toward embracing a written culture and led to an increase in the use of letter-writing. As will be seen, some of these factors are simply changes in the attitude of the culture toward the written word from the previous periods but in other cases the factors are specific events which had a direct impact upon moving the culture to a written one and leading to an increase in the use and change in the role of letter-writing.

Factors Creating a Movement to a Written Culture and an Increased Use of Letter-Writing

Public Writings and the Polis

There were two significant movements during the sixth century BC which paved the way for an increase in letter-writing in the

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[58]Thomas, R. *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens,* p.30.

[59]Thomas, R. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* p.13.

[60]Thomas, R. "Orality" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.1072.

subsequent eras. First there was a marked increase in the use of writing in public and semi public life. Harris[61] notes three significant areas of increase; public inscriptions of laws, the introduction of official secretaries and minted coins with abbreviated names. These show that the written word in the public arena was gaining acceptance. Second, was the development of the polis[62]. The first developmentary stage of the polis was the introduction of the lawcode which limited the arbitrary powers of the aristocracy and quelled social conflict. The concept of citizen developed next, replete with rights and duties. With the inception of the lawcode and concept of citizenship, there was a new motivation for men and their sons to learn 'letters'[63] in order to participate as citizens. It was natural that the Sophistic movement began in order to meet the need of those wanting to become citizens and learn letters. It is to this topic I now turn.

Philosophy and Sophism[64]

The fifth century BC marked the turning point for the increase in letter-writing which continued steadily through the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Sophism and what is commonly referred to as the second phase of philosophy, the period from Socrates to Aristotle (5th century BC-310 BC), played an important role in the increase in letter-writing. During this period the focus of philosophy shifted to more practical matters and human affairs from the previous concerns with cosmological speculations and natural science. Also whereas the function of the teacher had been subordinate in the

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[61]Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.53.

[62]See "polis" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* third ed., p.1205.

[63]Harris, William H. *Ancient Literacy* p.63.

[64]For an excellent overview on Sophism and Rhetoric see Liftin, Duane. *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series. Ed. Margaret E. Thrall. Vol. 79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. pp. 1-134.

previous eras, it now was emphasized[65]. This change in perspective was largely due initially to the influence of Socrates but was continued by his students. Socrates did not abandon or despise physical science nor did he encourage others to do likewise. But he saw the need for self understanding before or at least concomitant with understanding the world[66]. Thus through Socrates philosophy became more relevant and pertinent to the people because it now dealt with anthropological, ethical and practical issues. As would be expected, the demand for the writings of his teachings and that of other later philosophers increased.

The significant thing which the Sophists did was to take this moral and practical teaching and provide training for young men preparing for civic life. Protagoras, the most famous of the Sophists, offered a substitute for the former philosophy which focussed on finding the truth, even though it was considered to be in essence unattainable. Instead he offered an education in *virtue* [ἀρετή] in order to make men good citizens[67]. The Sophists, who were paid for their services[68], supplemented these young men's education in the area of

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[65]"Sophists" *Encyclopedia Britannica* p.1002.

[66]This truth is illustrated in a dialogue recorded by Plato between Socrates and Phaedrus. Socrates says 'I am not yet able, as the Delphic inscription has it, to know myself; so it seems to me ridiculous, when I do not yet know that, to investigate irrelevant things. So I dismiss these matters and accepting the customary belief about them, as I was saying just now, I investigate not these things, but myself, to know whether I am a monster more complicated and more furious than Typhon or a gentler and simpler creature, to whom a divine and quiet lot is given by nature'. Plato *Phaedrus* London: Harvard University Press, 1914 pp. 423-425 or 229E; 230D.

[67]Plato, records Protagoras saying, 'what he will learn is this; such prudence in domestic concerns as will best enable him to regulate his own household; such wisdom in public affairs as will best qualify him for becoming a statesman and orator'. Plato *Protagoras* 318E.

[68]de Romilly, Jacqueline *Les Grands Sophistes Dans L'Athènes de Periclès* p.24. As de Romilly points out, demand to be paid was unheard of before the Sophists and considered 'un petit scandale'. For further support: see

reading, writing (including letter-writing), gymnastics and music[69]. Because of the Sophists, no longer was education considered to be transferred through example alone nor heredity[70]; it now was open to anyone who could afford it[71]. Thus, the number of educators and students increased, which meant a higher level of literacy and greater use of the written word (including letter-writing) in public and private life .

Conquests of Alexander the Great

When Alexander the Great conquered new territories during the fourth century BC, he established Greek colonies by transplanting native Greeks or leaving soldiers who accompanied him on his conquests. In so doing he left the imprint of the Greek culture on the conquered territories[72] and he changed the political structure of the known world from city-states to a unified empire. As a result,

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Plato *Apology* 19e 'Each of these men, gentlemen, is able to go into any one of the cities and persuade the young men, who can associate for nothing with whomsoever they wish among their own fellow-citizens...to associate with them and pay them money and be grateful besides'. See also Plato *Greater Hippias* 282 C-D, where Socrates says about Gorgias 'he gained great reputation by his speaking before the Council, and in his private capacity, by giving exhibitions and associating with the young, he received a marvellous sum of money'.

[69] Jackson, H. "Sophists" *Encyclopedia Britannica* p.1001.

[70]Isocrates (436-338 BC) writes 'And so far has our city [Athens sic.] distanced the rest of mankind in thought and speech that her pupils have become the teachers of the rest of the world; and she has brought it about that the name 'Hellenes' suggests no longer a race but an intelligence, and the title 'Hellenes' is applied to those who share our culture than to those who share a common blood' trans. Norlin, George *Panegyricus* 50, Loeb Classical Library.

[71]de Romilly, Jacqueline *Les Grands Sophistes Dans L'Athènes de Periclès* p.24.

[72]Ferguson, Everett *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* pp.8-9.

he required an efficient form of communication in order to rule the colonies. Formerly the King would have been largely responsible for this administrative paper-work. Instead Alexander appointed various individuals to act on his behalf. In doing so the amount of written correspondence increased as did the types of letters. Welles[73] shows that this phenomenon continued in the other Hellenistic kingdoms and even increased after the dissolution of Alexander's empire, particularly in Egypt.

Alexander implemented several programmes which were instrumental in changing the face of the empire and had direct and indirect effects on the increase of letter-writing. First he began an inland road building programme in order to create an infrastructure which would provide safe and efficient travel around the empire[74]. Though with respect to his road building programme, Casson is correct in saying 'what Alexander and his successors had begun was brought to its logical conclusion by Rome'[75]. By the first century AD, Rome had created an elaborate network of safe roads (guarded by Roman Centurions) connecting most of the Roman Empire. Furthermore Rome also created safe passageway by water through patrolled sea lanes. Second, Alexander imposed a common

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[73]Welles, C.B. *Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934 p.xxxviii.

[74]See Casson, L. *Travel in the Ancient World* [1974] 116-23; Chevallier, R. *Roman Roads* [1976] 181-84; Mitchell, S. RJS [1976] 106-31; Levick, B.M. *The Government of the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook* [1985] 99-115; Ferguson, E. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, p.17.

[75]Casson, L. *Travel in the Ancient World* [1974] p.121. The known world was expanding and becoming more accessible, since from the West, Rome was beginning a series of road construction projects. These were usually the result of Roman conquests which were slowly absorbing new regions. The Via Appia [312 BC] and the Via Aemilia [187 BC] are examples of North-South expansionism in Italy and the Via Flamina [268 BC] of East-West expansionism. The first Roman Road outside of Italy was the Via Egnatia [148 BC]. For details see Chevallier, R. *Les Voies Romaines* [1972] pp.150-159.

language[76], koine Greek, on his empire enabling easy unimpeded communication[77]. Through these two efforts alone, new avenues of trade and commerce spawned and thus the need for additional written correspondence.

Third with the improved road service, Alexander the Great also created an organized postal service[78]. Formerly Greece and Rome relied on professional messengers (called *hemerodromoi* and *tabellarii*)[79], friends or private slaves. But Alexander set in place an elaborate postal system based on the Persian 'pony express style'. Alexander's successors reorganized the system but it was Augustus Caesar who developed the best postal service in antiquity, called the *cursus publicus*.[80] Caesar built even more roads and introduced the *positus* (which were the fixed posts along the way where the courier received a new mount[81]). It is said that a courier could travel anywhere between 50 to 150 miles per day[82]. The downside of these services was that they were not for the public, though public officials often used the postal service for personal

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[76]The reason Alexander imposed the common language was a concern for efficiency but also his concern to maintain the Greek identity amidst contact with "barbarians"; see Harris, W. *Ancient Literacy* p.138. see also Westermann, W.L. *Political Science Quarterly* 43 (1928) 364-87.

[77]Herodotus, in the fifth century BC, made the assumption that everyone could understand Greek if it was spoken loudly and sternly enough. Ferguson, Everett *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* p.9.

[78]White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.214.

[79]*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 3rd ed., p.1233.

[80]for more details about the cursus publicus see Chevallier, R. *Les Voies Romaines* [1972] pp.207-211; Casson, L. *Travel in the Ancient World* [1974] pp.182-190.

[81]Zilliacus, Laurin *From Pillar to Post: The Troubled History of the Mail* London: William Heinemann, 1956.

[82]*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 3rd ed., p.1233.

letters[83] and *cursus publicus* workers 'were not above being persuaded to accept other people's [mail sic.]'[84]. Private letter-writers were, in general, still dependent on finding people going to the same destination as the addressee. Despite this inconvenience, letter writing increased because travelling was safer and easier and therefore it was easier to find someone to transport a letter.

Writing Materials

The fourth factor which aided to increase letter-writing and to move the culture to a written one was the increase in the availability of writing materials and likewise the perfection of the quality of these materials[85] during the Ptolemaic period. Writing materials were no longer found solely in the hands of the rich and aristocracy as in the pre-Alexander era but they were available to the general populace. Papyrus was the main writing material though parchment was becoming increasingly available too. Egypt was the main producer of papyrus and the evidence suggests[86] that during the Greco-Roman period the harvest and sale of this product was a state owned monopoly[87] which distributed their papyrus across the

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[83]Pliny the Younger [Pliny *Epistles* 10,120]. Pliny explains to the emperor Trajan, he had never abused the postal service but in this one case he used the government postal service in order to send his wife to her aunt upon hearing about her grandfather's death. Trajan responds [Pliny Epistles 10, 121] it was good he used the system and did not wait for the warrants, which Trajan would have gotten to Pliny too late. Warrants were passes issued to officials so that they could use the government postal service for private usage.

[84]Badian, E "Postal Service" *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 2nd ed. p.869.

[85]see Lewis, N. *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968. pp.128ff.

[86]One example is PTebt lll, pt.1, 709.

[87]White, John L. *Light from Ancient Letters*, p.213.

Mediterranean seaboard[88]. The availability and trade of writing materials continued through to the first century AD.

Rhetoric and Epistolary Handbooks

The Sophistic movement created a large interest in rhetoric which continued from the fourth century BC throughout the next several centuries because now the public wanted and could learn how to be a rhetorician. Rhetoric is the art of effective public speaking in order to persuade one's audience. Originally rhetoric was commonplace in the political assemblies and law courts. But increasingly this popular medium was applied to written works and even letters. Kennedy notes, 'since letters were considered to be one side of a conversation it is not difficult to see how the rules and subjects of rhetoric which originally were applied to oral speech were subsequently applied to written compositions'[89]. This had significant ramifications on the use and role of letter-writing. Not only did it mean that letters would be used more but it also meant that letters now could be used as a substitute for oral communications in order to persuade the addressees to take some action or make some judgment. Doty points to the publication of Cicero's letters as the turning point. He says

> the publication of 931 letters of Cicero (106-43 BC), mostly after Cicero's death, was an event of some importance for the history of the letter, since until their appearance as a collection, no Greek or Roman had dreamed of winning by his letters the approval of educated men[90].

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[88]Ferguson, E. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, p.92.

[89]Kennedy, George A. *Greek Rhetoric Under Christian Emperors*, p.14.

[90]Doty does not give support for his idea. He simply says that 'the publication of 931 letters of Cicero (106-43 BC), mostly after Cicero's death, was an event of some importance for the history of the letter, since until their appearance as a collection, no Greek or Roman had dreamed of

Doty does not support his idea so it is hard to prove or disprove whether someone used letters in a persuasive manner before him. Nevertheless what is important is that letters now were being used in a new manner, to persuade and teach. I show in a subsequent section just how important this is to NT writers in the first century AD.

It was also the rhetoricians of the Ptolemaic period who gave letter-writing credibility as an authentic and respectable form of communication by defining the 'epistolary style' in their rhetorical handbooks (e.g. *De Elocutione*, by Pseudo-Demetrius §§223-35). This provides yet one more example, in the Greco-Roman world, of the move from a strictly oral culture to a hybrid oral-written culture.

During the period between the first century BC and the second century AD, handbooks on letter-writing were created which dealt with the theoretical and practical aspects of letter-writing. The theoretical handbooks on letter-writing were probably the work of rhetoricians and included topics on style, content, structure, length and nature of letters. The practical handbooks (e.g. Pseudo-Demetrius' *Epistolary Types*) were geared toward students and show that letter-writing was becoming a basic component of education[91]. But these handbooks were also adapted for professional letter-writers who needed specific definitions and examples of the different letter-types in order to fulfil their job.

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winning by his letters the approval of educated men'. Doty, W.G. *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, p.2.

[91]Malherbe notes that Egyptian teachers provided model letters of specific letter-types for students to copy. He bases this observation on the work of Erman, A. *Die Literatur der Aegypter*. Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1923. He concludes that Greek teachers followed the same example. Then he cites the examples of four model letters used as a teaching exercise found in ₱Paris 63 as proof of this practice as early as 164 BC. See Malherbe, Abraham J. *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988. pp.4,5,9-10.

Two handbooks on letter-writing exist today, Pseudo-Demetrius' *Epistolary Types* (first century BC to first century AD) and Pseudo-Libanius' *Epistolary Styles* (fourth to sixth century AD). The former contains 21 letter-types and the latter 41. The existence of these handbooks proves three things: 1) letter-writing had increased in usage; 2) the role of letter-writing had developed substantially by the first century AD and continued to do so until the fourth to sixth century AD and 3) the increase in the number of types of letters indicates that letters were being used for more and varied purposes.

Conclusion

Through this paper I have shown that from the eighth century BC until the first century AD, there was a slow but definite movement to integrate the written culture into the primarily oral culture of the Greco-Roman world. I presented specific factors and events which precipitated this change. A natural by-product of this integration was a significant increase in the use of letter-writing, change in the purpose of letter-writing and a proliferation in the number of letter-types.

Consequences for the Early Church

There are several consequences for the Early Church as a result of the movement from an oral culture to a hybrid oral-written culture and the concomitant increase of and expanded role of letter-writing.

Need of the Early Church and the Purpose of Letters

The early church embraced letters as one of their means of communication because the purpose of letters matched their needs. One important need of the early church leaders was to communicate with those churches from which they were separated because of distance or conflict (1 Thess 2:17) or imprisonment. Separation inevitably can lead to a breakdown in relationship. For this reason in some NT letters the author writes in order to maintain his friendly relationship with his readers and to make his presence known to them when he is unable to be with them in person. Koskenniemi

refers to these as *philophronesis* and *parousia* respectively[92]. Koskenniemi is certainly correct in his observation and therefore it is expected that the NT letters should be somewhat dialogical in nature and used in place of personal presence. In fact this is what one finds. In Phil 1:3-8, Paul expresses his joy and love of the Philippians in letter form. These are the same words he would have used could he have been with them face to face. The reader only has one side of the conversation, that is Paul's. Elsewhere Paul makes it clear that there is no dissonance between his words and actions when he says to the Corinthian church 'what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present' (2 Cor 10:11). Paul's concept of letter-writing coincides exactly with those ideas prevailing in the first century AD. For example Demetrius defined the letter as 'one of the two sides of a dialogue...[and] should be a little more studied than a dialogue' (Demetrius, *De Elocutione* 223,224). Seneca illustrates this in his letter:

> I thank you for writing to me so often; for you are revealing your real self to me in the only way you can. I never receive a letter from you without being in your company forthwith...how much more pleasant a letter, which brings traces, real evidences, of an absent friend. For that which is sweetest when we meet face to face is afforded by the impress of a friend's hand upon his letter[93].

The dialogical aspect of letter-writing is depicted in another letter of Seneca.

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[92]Koskenniemi, Heikki. "Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des Griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr." *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*. Vol. 102.2. Helsinki: Wiesbaden, 1956. pp.1-210.

[93]Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 40,1 as translated in Malherbe, Abraham J. *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988. p.29.

> I prefer that my letters should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another's company or taking walks together[94].

It is not possible to determine if the NT letter-writers had read *De Elocutione* or Seneca's letters for that matter but what is evident is that the NT letter-writers have used letters in the same way they are purposed in their respective literary culture.

A second important need of the early church was the need for teaching. As the Church grew there was a paucity of leaders to teach and little teaching on how to apply the gospel to specific problems. There was clearly a strain on the first apostles. The quickest and easiest way to meet this need was the use of letters. The previous century marked a watershed moment (i.e. the publication of Cicero's letters and the use of rhetoric in letters) in which letters could now be used for persuading and teaching and not just oratory. Because letters had become culturally acceptable meant that the gospel had a chance to spread in a way it would not have been possible two centuries earlier. The early church writers embraced the attitude of the rhetoricians, namely to use the letter to persuade and teach. Paul's letters are full of examples of teaching in response to a report or a letter he has received (1 Cor 1:11; 7:1) and persuading his readers to reject some teaching (Gal 1:6-9) or group (2 Thess 3:14).

Language and Infrastructure

The letter-writing activity of the early church was facilitated by the common language and road system of Rome. The imposition of the common language by Alexander the Great and continued by Rome in the first century AD allowed the early church leaders to communicate quickly to distant lands and cultures in the same

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[94]Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 75, 1-2 as translated in Malherbe, Abraham J. *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988. p.29.

language. In doing so these church leaders were able to guide and direct congregations from a distance through letters.

The creation of Rome's elaborate safe road network and postal service, *cursus publicus*, were key factors which made the letter the obvious means of communication for the fledgling Christian movement. This is not to say that messengers were not also used for it is clear that the NT writers used messengers to carry their letters. In fact the NT messengers were most probably used to pass on additional thoughts of the author to the recipients (Eph 6:20-21; Col 4:7-8[95]). But the advantage of sending a letter instead of an oral message is that the recipients could have a written document which they could keep. The written document could be presented to the opposing parties or to the undisciplined person etc. in order to show the position of the NT leaders on the matter. Also it has been suggested that a written letter could also serve the liturgical needs of the church[96]. But probably more important is that these letters could then be further circulated. The common language enabled a letter to be read by different communities and thereby expanded their repertoire of teaching. In Col 4:16, Paul encourages the Colossians to give their letter to the Laodiceans to read and *vice versa*.

Letter-types

It has been clearly shown that the increase in letter-writing led to an increase in the types of letters which could be written. The NT is a case in point since it includes several different types of letters. Stowers has classified several letters according to the categories found in Demetrius' *De Elocutione* and Libanius' *Epistolary*

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[95]Note following quotation from a letter cited by White: 'The rest please learn from the man who brings you the letter. For he is no stranger to us'. White, John L. *Light From Ancient Letters*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986. p.216.

[96]Champion, L.G. "Benedictions and Doxologies in the Epistles of Paul." Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde. Rupercht-Karls-Universität zu Heidelberg, 1934.

Styles[97]. Though it is appropriate to categorise an entire letter in this way, Malherbe is certainly correct to say that the letter-types listed in these two works provides a 'collection of styles appropriate to different circumstances and a guide to the tone in which letters are to be written'[98]. Therefore within a letter there may be in fact several different 'letter-types'. A quick examination of the NT letters shows that this is true. Advice is used in 1 Cor 5:1-13. In six of the seven letters in Revelation there is a combination of praise and admonition letter-types. This suggests that the NT writers were well aware of contemporary epistolary theory, whether through exposure to the epistolary handbooks in circulation or to the education system it is impossible to tell. But their awareness of different letter-types meant that they were able to create letters which were focussed to the need of the readers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that letter-writing played a significant role in the development and nurture of the Early Church given the fact that 20 of the 27 books of the NT are letters. The increase in letter-writing and the change in the role of letter-writing leading up to the first century AD were in part responsible for enabling the New Testament letters to have the tremendous impact they did.

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[97]See Stowers, Stanley K. *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986. pp.91ff.

[98]Malherbe, Abraham J. *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988. p.4.

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