NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES AND THE USE OF AMANUENSES

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Introduction

The majority of New Testament writings are letters, so we expect them to reflect practices in first-century letter writing. One custom was using an amanuensis, a stenographer who wrote down the contents. Biblical studies do not give this factor much attention even though New Testament writers used amanuenses. The oversight seems unusual to us today since most of us in the Western world write our own correspondence. If we do employ a secretary, it is primarily for computer skills. We are accustomed to reproducing by typeset, copiers, or computer printers. But ancient writers had to use different methods. If the work of an amanuensis can impact New Testament studies, we should allow that to affect our thinking where appropriate.

I. The Use of Amanuenses in the First Century

Evidence abounds from recovered letters that using an amanuensis was normal, especially if the communication dealt with important matters or items of public record, if the author was illiterate (ἀγράμματος) or slow at writing (βραδύς). The author would have the amanuensis write out the body of the letter and then he himself would conclude it with appropriate remarks in his own handwriting and date it. The scribe could be a stenographer, who took down dictation verbatim from the author. Depending on the skills of the amanuensis and practical factors in the situation, he could have had a broader role in producing the work. In his oft-cited German classic on the papyri, O. Roller expressed the opinion that verbatim dictation was not the normal way an amanuensis worked, although others dispute this view.[1]

II. New Testament Data on Amanuenses

Amanuensis work is extensive in the New Testament. 2 Thessalonians **3**:17 indicates that Paul regularly closed his letters with a specimen of his own handwriting, which implies that an amanuensis penned the body of his letters. In Romans **16**:22, Tertius the scribe names himself and includes a first-person comment, which is unique among extant letters (Windisch, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, **I**:501). 1 Corinthians **16**:21 and Colossians **4**:18 say that Paul wrote the concluding salutation. Galatians **6**:11 implies that the material through **6**:10 was written by a scribe: *"See with what big letters I have written to you with my own hand." "Big letters"* (πηλίκοις γράμμασιν) is not likely to mean "a long letter" so as to indicate that the apostle himself penned the whole (hence, ἔγραψα is an epistolary aorist?). Philemon 19 says, *"I write it with my own hand: 'I will repay it.'"* Since the comment appears midway through the letter, Paul may have scribed all this short letter, although he may have taken the pen from the amanuensis and inserted that pledge in his own

handwriting. 1 Peter **5**:12 shows that Peter also used an amanuensis, in this case Silvanus. In the Old Testament, Baruch served as scribe for Jeremiah (Jeremiah **36**; **45**:1).

III. Critical Implications of the Use of Amanuenses

A. Structure

1. Using an amanuensis explains the occurrence of loosely attached paragraphs at the ends of letters, places where the author picked up the pen to add the customary postscript. The final comment in his own handwriting guaranteed that the letter was a genuine communication from the writer and that its contents met with his approval (2 Thessalonians **3**:17-18).

> The author's handwriting would have shown up in 1 Corinthians **16**:21-23: *"The salutation of me, Paul, with my own hand. If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be anathema. Marana tha. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. My love is with you all in Christ Jesus."*

In 2 Corinthians **13**:(12-)14 and Galatians **6**:11-18 we also have Paul's own hand. Other closing paragraphs are Ephesians **6**:(21-)23-24; Philippians **4**:21-23; Colossians **4**:18; 1 Thessalonians **5**:28; 2 Thessalonians **3**:17-18; 1 Timothy **6**:(17-21a)21b; 2 Timothy **4**:18; Titus **3**:15b; Philemon (19?) 25 (or the whole letter?).

The case with Romans is complicated by textual variants. The doxology (**16**:25-27), which is variously located, could have been in Paul's hand.[2] The benediction (**16**:20b) is another possibility: *"May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."* It, too, is located variously.[3]

Authors' postscripts for non-Pauline writings are more difficult to identify. Hebrews **13**:(22-)25 might qualify; James and 1 John end rather abruptly without greetings or benedictions; 1 Peter **5**:(12-)14b could have been an autograph; 2 Peter is uncertain; 2 John 12-13 and 3 John (13-14a) 14b may be postscripts.

2. Using an amanuensis could explain digressions in the letters because they more naturally occur in oral presentation because of the faster delivery (1 Peter **3**:20b-22). That possibility would be more likely if the scribe knew some kind of shorthand, a matter we cannot push in New Testament books; we do not know what clerical training these men had.

B. Style/authorship

Less certain is the extent to which having an amanuensis qualifies the validity of style studies as bases for evauating traditional authorship. What happens if Paul used more than one scribe in his letters or wrote most of them with an amanuensis but some in his own hand? How much difference would that create between the letters? The options for using a scribe go all the way from word-for-word dictation (stenographer) to simply giving a line of thought and leaving the amanuensis responsible for generating the verbal expression of the letter (co-author). Since the New Testament letters involve complex material about important themes, the essential author would presumably have originated the structure and subject matter in each book. Literary patterns like parallelism, ring composition, or chiasmus would

presumably come from him.[4] Scribal input would mostly affect the verbal and grammatical levels rather than the structural and material ones.

Some factors would increase the likelihood that New Testament amanuenses did more than take dictation. **(a)** Tertius' statement in Romans shows that Paul gave him a certain amount of freedom. **(b)** From the two known examples—Tertius and Silvanus, we infer that New Testament amanuenses were fellow Christians instead of professional scribes; so they could enter into the process more creatively. **(c)** Paul especially was an activist, which suggests that he might concern himself with process more than detail, content more than wording. **(d)** New Testament writers seem not to have been as concerned as we are about exact wording, which again increases the possibility for scribal influence on words and grammar. Even New Testament quotations of the Old Testament and sub-apostolic quotations of the New Testament are more by sense than exact wording. Parallel accounts of Jesus' teaching material are not exact. We can say the same for the common material between Jude and 2 Peter. The speeches in Acts are surely gists of the actual presentations.

Paul did not use an amanuensis because he was uneducated or could not write well, but because it seemed more natural.[5] Ancient cultures were more oral than ours, and rhetoric was first an oral art, with written communication deriving from oral. An itinerant evangelist like Paul would use a scribe out of the habit of oral delivery. He could concentrate on what he was saying without the added concern of the writing itself. While the scribe was putting down what he had just said, he could be arranging his next thought, much like speakers who work through an interpreter in a "lining out" format as opposed to "running translation."[6]

There are several places where an amanuensis involvement may relate to style of writing. **(1)** Many have wondered how James, Jude, and the Petrine epistles could exhibit such good Greek if they were written by Galileans. **(2)** Using different amanuenses might explain the divergent styles of 1 and 2 Peter. Early Christian writers speak of Mark as Peter's interpreter, so allowing a scribe rather free reign in written work would not be surprising. **(3)** There is an unmistakable difference in style between Revelation and the other Johannine writings. Since John was on Patmos when he wrote Revelation (**1**:9), he may not have had an amanuensis to assist him in reworking his manner of expression as he did in his gospel and letters. **(4)** The use of a different amanuensis for the pastorals may combine with other factors to explain stylistic differences some scholars have seen between them and earlier Pauline epistles.

(5) Could an amanuensis have been among the factors that answer the Hebrews mystery? Perhaps Luther's suggestion that Apollos the Alexandrian wrote it could combine with the Alexandrian tradition of Pauline authorship. Apollos, an eloquent man (Acts **18**:24), may have had freer reign than normal in making an appeal to Jewish Christians to remain faithful despite the prospect of persecution for their faith. If Luke collaborated with Paul, maybe that is the reason for stylistic affinities some have noted between Hebrews and Luke-Acts. (See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 677.)[7] Barnabas was well-suited in personality for this endeavor as well. Any of the men in Paul's circle may have taken notes on presentations they heard him make and later have written them up much as a student may take notes and afterwards write them up in full; in this case he would also have adapted them to the needs of this audience. Under such scenarios Origen's famous opinion might be incisive: the ideas in Hebrews are admirable like those of the apostle's, but the phraseology

belongs to someone relating Paul's comments ("who wrote").[7] With Hebrews and 2 Peter, amanuensis starts sliding over into co-authorship and deutero-authorship.

It is passing strange that ancient Christians, for whom Greek was their native language, did not make much of style questions. Modern negative critics are the ones who question the traditional authorship of books that seem to them to differ stylistically in marked degrees. Is the problem that modern scholars unnaturally restrict the range of style an author could use in that second language? Or did the ancients allow for scribal effects on style because in their culture amanuenses took part in such efforts? Or did their Christian commitment simply blind them to these differences?

We are not inclined to push the effect of an amanuensis on style, since (a) Paul's various letters—including the pastorals—do not show highly divergent styles even though some may have been written by his own hand (Philemon?) and various scribes could have penned the others. Happily, modern scholarship is pulling back from extreme negative criticism against traditional authorship on stylistic grounds; so the issue is not so urgent as it once was. (b) Early Christian writers did not appeal to amanuenses as a factor that would affect style even when they did notice the difference—as in Hebrews notably.

C. Redaction and multiplication

The use of amanuenses could include redaction activity on New Testament writings. **(a)** There seem to have been several recensions of Romans. Different placements of the doxology (**16**:25-27) and benediction (**16**:20b) imply some early source of textual variation. There were evidently copies of the book without chapter **16** and without chapters **15-16**. Someone like Tertius could have made copies of Romans as circulating summaries of the gospel. That could explain omitting *in Rome* (**1**:7, 15) in a few manuscripts. **(b)** If 2 Corinthians is really a conflation of two letters (**1-9** and **10-13**), Paul or his amanuensis could have spliced the two together later for some practical reason. **(c)** Since there were at least three house churches in Rome (**16**:5, 14, 15), the Roman letter may have been copied for each of the worshiping units. The same could be said for all the letters that were sent to metropolitan centers with more than one house church. **(d)** The *Letter to the Laodecians* may be our Ephesians, which could relate to the loss of *in Ephesus* (**1**:1) in a few manuscripts. Perhaps it circulated throughout Asia like the Apocalypse. At Paul's request, the amanuensis could have made copies for several congregations. **(e)** When Paul, Silas, and Timothy toured the Gentile churches on the second journey, they delivered copies of the Jerusalem "decree" (Acts **16**:4; cp. **15**:19-31). Producing these copies would have been a natural responsibility for an amanuensis.

D. Collection of the Pauline epistles

Scholars have offered a number of explanations for how Paul's letters came to be one body of writing.[8] Using an amanuensis raises an option for the collection and selection of the Pauline corpus for canonical purposes. One responsibility could have been duplicating the letter as a record of correspondence or as a backup copy in case the original was destroyed or lost. We wonder whether that possibility lies behind Paul's statement to Timothy (2 Timothy **4**:13) about bringing him the books (βιβλία) and the parchments (μεμβράνας). Were the parchments blank writing materials Paul wanted to use to make more

durable copies of his writings now that his own death was looming near? Were the "books" copies of his earlier writings, or were they just part of his "library"? Why did Timothy have these books and parchments that apparently belonged to Paul? Was he Paul's main amanuensis? This last question might explain the presence of his name in the headings of six of Paul's letters, although we doubt it.[9] At any rate, with the aid of his amanuenses and other co-workers, Paul could have made a collection of his own epistles as he wrote them.

Besides collecting his letters, there was surely a selection process as well. Unless the Letter to the Laodecians is the Book of Ephesians (Colossians **4**:16), at least one letter of Paul has been lost. 1 Corinthians **5**:9-13 is often taken as a reference to an earlier letter to Corinth. In 2 Thessalonians **3**:17 Paul demonstrated what his handwriting looked like: *"This is the way I write"*; this was his "sign" in every letter. At most, 2 Thessalonians is only the third extant letter of Paul by that time. Since he had already been preaching for many years, he undoubtedly had authored more than three communications. Perhaps among the amanuenses' copies, he himself selected those that would best serve the needs of the churches after his approaching death, a concern the Apostle Peter also felt (2 Peter **1**:12-15).

IV. Inspiration

The use of an amanuensis widens the range of constructs possible within "God-breathedness." Instead of always having a positive role that originated terms, style, and ideas, the Spirit more likely served a protective and confirmatory role in the production of what had a significant aspect of human generation of ideas and ways of expressing them (manner of inspiration). To have a wholly reliable text, the Holy Spirit need not have dictated the letters since the human authors themselves dictated many of the biblical writings to scribes. Even the scribe could have materially affected the terminology and grammatical expression of ideas. Our view of inerrancy should not hinge on a mechanism that requires verbal dictation. Inspiration is a protective and restrictive process rather than a purely positive one.

Having an amanuensis does not loosen "God-breathedness" from inerrancy to infallibility. (a) Paul and Peter were not using professional scribes, but fellow workers who were believers. Tertius greeted the Romans "in the Lord" (Romans **16**:22); Silvanus was a "faithful brother" (1 Peter **5**:12). Such men would qualify as "apostolic" in the canonical usage of that term because they worked in the apostolic circle as extensions of the apostolic office. (b) The author would have read over the finished product before giving it his approval. Anything unacceptable would have been corrected before it was sent out. Furthermore, (c) inspiration deals with the intended content of scripture-as-such, not with particular matters of form like phraseology, vocabulary, or grammar that may have come from the amanuensis.[10] The resulting nature of scripture is the same, but the ways it came about are complexified.

V. Hermeneutics

The use of amanuenses fosters a less rigid hermeneutic. We already have to consider (1) the deficiencies of human language communication itself, especially (2) written language deficiencies, as well as (3) translation difficulties both from the biblical to modern languages

and from the original Aramaic/Hebrew proclamation to the Greek text of the New Testament. There are also (4) cross-cultural differences between biblical settings and our own along with (5) textual-transmission errors, both of which are aggravated by the (6) time factor between text and interpreter. Under these circumstances fine nuances that are dependent on exact terminology and phraseology are less likely to match the level of the author's intent. If the use of amanuenses has the potential of affecting the verbiage, (7) we must all the more resist the temptation to depart the principle of minimum affirmation. In interpretation, being more exact is not necessarily being more correct.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, the amanuensis may have rewritten the letter after taking initial dictation perhaps in shorthand, polishing its expression in the process. It may have been his job to make a second copy for the author's records, to make multiple copies that could serve as encyclicals, and even to adapt previous writings to secondary usages. The use of amanuenses could have implications (1) for style studies as they impact questions about authorship, (2) for the collection of the Pauline corpus as one step in the formation of the canon, and (3) for certain aspects of redaction criticism on the unity of books and questions about their textual integrity. Using an amanuensis would be a culturally relevant way of bringing these activities more directly under apostolic supervision in contrast to unguided eventuation.

In conclusion, the central goal of an exercise like this one is to encourage believers to remember relevant factors like the use of amanuenses when working out explanations for phenomena of the biblical text. Such an approach contrasts with postulating scenarios that discredit New Testament writings as reliable records of Christian beginnings and accurate guides for faith and practice.

Endnotes

[1]O. Roller, *Das Formular der paulinischer Briefe, ein Beitrag zur Lehre vom antiken Briefe* (Stuttgart, 1933), p. 333; the opposite view, however, was taken by F. R. M. Hitchcock, "The Use of *graphein*," *Journal of Theological Studies* 31 (1930), 273-74 (cited by Longenecker).

[2]Besides appearing at the end of the book, in some witnesses the doxology comes at the end of chapter **15**, at the end of chapter **14**, at the end of chapter **14** and chapter **16**, or not at all.

[3]In addition to being the last half of **16**:20, it has been located after **16**:23, becoming **16**:24 in older English translations. Sometimes it occurs in both places or is omitted altogether. Some manuscripts make it the last verse of the book, **16**:27; p^{46} puts it at the end of chapter **15**.

[4]See, for example, Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), pp. xiii-xvi. He points out a number of ABA patterns in both letters.

[5]Though he professed not to be eloquent (1 Corinthians **2**:1-5; cp. 2 Corinthians **10**:10), Paul did not hire an orator to defend him before Felix as the Jewish leaders hired Tertullus

(Acts **24**:1-21). He made his own defense before Festus (Acts **25**:1-12) and Agrippa (Acts **26**:1-29) as well.

[6]In the first century B.C., Cicero had available to him a system for Latin shorthand, but the evidence for Greek shorthand is not clear until the mid-second century A.D. Richard Longenecker surmises that the complexity of the system implies that its development would have taken a while, which could push its origin back into the first century (*New Dimensions*, 288).

[7]Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* **6**:25, based on Origen's *Homilies on Hebrews*. Four ancient views of authorship for Hebrews were Luke, Barnabas, Clement of Rome, and Paul.

[8]Lewis Foster has suggested that Luke collected Paul's writings (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10 [1967]: 44-55).

[9]The extra names in the headings are not amanuenses because (a) Romans, written by Tertius, is not in the heading; (b) 1 and 2 Thessalonians have two names in the headings; (c) Philemon, perhaps completely written by Paul, has Timothy in the heading. Finally, (d) it was not customary to mention the amanuensis in the introduction.

The extra names are not co-authors. (1) In letters like 1 Corinthians, which has a second name, "I" appears frequently (1 Corinthians **1**:7, 11, 14, *etc*.). (2) The Thessalonian letters have two extra names in the headings.

The added names are not just prominent people the recipients knew; salutations occur at the end (cp. Colossians **4**:10-17, *etc*.).

The extra names are probably co-founders of the addressed congregation who were present with Paul when he wrote back to them.

[10]For this reason we consider unnecessary the qualifications on inspiration that George Mavrodes saw because technically there were no New Testament "autographs," the letters being written by amanuenses ("The Inspiration of the Autographs," *Evangelical Quarterly* 41[1969]: 19-29). One mistake here is the foreign idea that inerrancy applies to "autographs." Inerrancy addresses content of scripture, not some copy, not the manner of origin or transmission, not translation.

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