Thirty years ago I experienced my first profound disconnect from the SBL. As I walked from what was the farthest hotel to the Convention Center, I passed newsstands that offered a rather unintelligible headline: “Congressman Missing.” When I walked by the following day the headline of the Times Picayune read, “Congressman killed.” This led me to buy a paper and begin to learn of the horror that was Jonestown. Each day brought more of the mounting tragedy. Yet, while I was intermittently becoming aware of this gruesome news, I found myself going to sessions and discussions that never alluded to this developing religious story. Of course, I can only speak from my limited perspective. But the “sounds of silence” were deafening to me. While the print and electronic media concussively made their presence felt, the academy seemed to be blithely unaware of events as the lecturers droned on and the applause occurred on cue.

I begin my remarks with that startling experience of disconnect because it illustrates the very condition that BAMM has been disclosing since this project began. The BAMM session came into existence on the premise that there was more to the task of interpretation than the text itself. Without sensitivity to the atmosphere that surrounds

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The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media Section after Twenty-Five Years

Hearing Voices

Arthur J. Dewey

*So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years –
Trying to learn to use words ... And so each venture is a new
beginning, a raid on the inarticulate.*

T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

*Those who have ears to hear, let them listen!*

*Mark 4:9*
the text, particularly, without the recognition of the media of communication there can be no genuine understanding of culture and cultural transmission. The pioneering work of Walter Ong, followed by Marshall McLuhan, and then advanced in biblical studies by Werner Kelber, had opened this interpretive realm to the academy. Yet, this insight into the ways that the oral, written, print and electronic media predispose our thought and shape our communication was not shared by the biblical guild. The general focus was already embedded in the age of print, where things were black and white, fixed and clear – or, at least, this is where biblical investigations wanted to go. BAMM has tenaciously attempted through the years to expose the biblical guild to the experience of how the media affect the enterprise of interpretation. Yet the guild seemed to shy away from what might happen if they were to take into account the very ways and means of the traditions under investigation. Wasn’t this going outside the competence and sphere of biblical scholarship? What control would there be if scholars started to “hear voices”?

Let me begin my observations with the necessity of “hearing voices.” First of all, I would make the point that our concern with voices, that is, voices distinctive for their period and place, comes very much because of the invention of the phonograph. Without that invention there would not be any way of gauging the actual sound difference between voices over time. I was struck some years ago over the fact that, while I remember the distinctive sound and rhythm of my grandfather’s voice, I cannot reproduce it. Sadly there are no recordings of his voice. I can deliver his words; but not the tone. Yet with the phonograph we begin not only to become conscious of vocal distinctions but also to set voices side by side for comparison and for unknown effect. Without recording the folk poets of Yugoslavia, we would not be aware of what happens in the performance and transmission of oral poetry. A new medium has a ricocheting effect of what we once knew and took for granted.

Another way of saying this is that the introduction of new technology allows us to double back on our data. The electronic medium has re-introduced us to the possibilities of orality. Our ability to make distinctions due to the capacities of the electronic medium has actually raised our horizon regarding the interpretation of orality.
Let me illustrate this by pointing to what BAMM has done in regard to the interpretation of Paul. From the outset it was evident that BAMM interpreters of Paul began off the page. Even when we looked closely at the text, we tried to “hear” it by attending to the hints and suggestions of orality within the written passages. In effect, we were making critical distinctions, differentiating the oral cues from or within the written text. David Rhoads’ performance of Galatians threw a totally new light on the interpretation of Paul’s letter for many in the academy. A number of Paul actually had to rethink Paul rhetorical intent and play. Indeed, many caught for the first time some glimmer of humor in what formerly had seemed a rather sober defense. Here the embodied performance doubled back on the interpretation of the text.

In “A Re-Hearing of Romans 10:1-15, I paid close attention to the oral and written clues in Rom 10, (namely, the personification of the speaking Dikaiosune, the enfolding of the written scripture from Deut 30:12-14 within the oral field of the letter’s argument, and the anticipation of the oral experience of the audience), in arguing for a distinctly oral bias of this passage. I concluded that Paul’s rhetorical choices had to be placed within an appreciation of the letter’s performance and response of the Roman community. In other words, I was trying to adjust my reading of Romans to the larger acoustic of social space, where the language Paul employed was invented to echo the experience of the community. Paul attempted an antiphonal effect where the true experience of the relationship of trust would be discerned and felt within the oral interaction itself. In fact, Paul was playing upon the depths of utopian dreams and desires of the first century in declaring that genuine access to ultimate power was within the grasp of his listeners.

What I did not consider directly at that time was the imperial echo chamber in which these words of Paul swirled—despite pointing out that Rom 10:13 would carry an association with an appeal to the emperor. Furthermore, although I distinguished the utopian strains of Paul and Philo, I did not throw into relief what affect Rom 10: 4-13 would have upon an audience quite familiar with imperial propaganda.

This led me to a further investigation. As I began to consider the acoustical atmosphere which the letter to the Romans presupposed, I began to realize that the echo chamber that must be reckoned with is that of the Roman Empire itself. It is not simply a recognition that the political-theological realities must be taken into consideration. Rather, it is a matter of
understanding that Rome was intent on controlling the acoustic space of the Empire. This point can be graphically illustrated through inspecting what Romans did to cities they conquered. A major changed occurred. The town hall lost its place as the locus of power. The bema or rostrum became the focal urban point. This is where things were said; where Rome spoke. But we can also see this is by exploring the Roman euaggelion. The world news of Rome came in inscriptions, altars, temples and coins; in poetry and prose, on walls and even in privies. What becomes clear to the interpreter of Romans is that attention to the imperial surround sound, disclosed from the mute remains of pots and stones, has an enormous echoing effect. Without such mute witnesses we cannot begin to hear the counter-cultural sounds of Paul.

Indeed, to work through the sounds of Paul, I have recently used the groundbreaking work of Brandon Scott and Margaret Lee in regard to Greek sound-mapping, which was introduced in BAMM some years ago. By taking seriously what Scott and Lee maintain about sound-mapping, one can set Rom 1:1-7 within the rhetorical context of its performance. What do these technical notions yield for our understanding of Paul’s efforts? By constructing an introduction that achieves what the ancients considered a “polished” style Paul has attempted to present a sound pattern that would be taken seriously as an elevated piece. The letter to the Romans has entered into competition with the elegant embodiment of the Empire. Such formality of speech would represent an intention to demonstrate that Paul’s discourse was on equal (or greater) footing with imperial claims.

Commentators on Romans have noted that Paul’s opening greatly differs from his other letter openings both in length and elegance. It is not simply the case, however, that Paul was trying to impress an unfamiliar audience. If we recall that such sounds would echo within the very heart of the Empire, we get the distinct impression that these sounds would have been heard as fundamentally dissonant and treasonous. Not only does Jesus’ earthly lineage have royal ties; Jesus has been “deified as “son of God’ in power.” His name (“Jesus – anointed – our lord”), is acclaimed, just as Augustus’ name was hymned, and echoes from Paul’s lips to those who call on this name with “corresponding trust”. Furthermore, all nations have been “summoned” to respond. Thus, we can see in these opening words that Paul is establishing himself as an emissary
in grandiloquent terms. He represents a new and alternative regime and his rhetoric matches his mission. The performance of this letter opening would have offered to the Roman communities the opportunity to become co-conspirators with Paul in acknowledging that a regime change had occurred and that they were acclaiming the true ruler of the universe. Paul’s euaggelion (1:16) is thus a dynamic communication overturning the default euaggelion of the Roman world itself.

In short, the recognition of the “surround sound” of the letter to the Romans opens up onto the political implications of discerning acoustic space. The investigation of the acoustics of Romans doubles back onto our own political realities. The presence of BAMM within the SBL has represented a fifth column, a counter voice to the way in which the guild has maintained critical control. To avoid the variety and plethora of voices either in the ancient past or in the present world is to choose a gated intellectual community. Scholars may prefer to stay out of the noisy give-and-take, to maintain an objective distance and neutrality, but that disguises what actually happens. We have settled for a ghetto existence. Reports of a religious massacre can be pouring in and they are not even on our critical radar.

On the other hand, to speak openly also has consequences. To allow strange voices into the discussion brings about a marked unbalance. But this insight has allowed us to imagine what Paul might have been about. Was he not claiming that those who had no voice now had a right to appeal, that those who had no access to power could speak freely in assemblies around the world? Moreover, in utilizing the recognition of the dialectic of media and message are not our investigations actually bringing a distinctive voice to both Paul and ourselves? In fact, is the very manner in which we have continued our critical work actually contributing and advancing the freedom of speech within the academy?

Lastly I would like to address a concern that a number of us (myself included) in BAMM have had for some time. Since we are so far-reaching and transgress in going beyond the borders of the page, is there any way in which we can provide some control, that is, some way to check our apparently impressionistic interpretations? How can we have any assurance that we are in conversation with the momentum of this mute historical material? Actually we have a number of ways. Let me mention two. First, we can and
have drawn on the results of rhetorical criticism. Especially in regard to Paul one must be constantly alert to the rhetorical strategies and options Paul employs. Of course, one can check these over against other ancient authors. The second manner of control is through the analysis of deep metaphors that are used in speech. One can, for instance, make a detailed mapping of the underlying metaphors in Paul. Moreover, as Lakoff and Johnson have argued, such deep metaphors arise from the experience of embodiment. Metaphor is not some frosting on the cake of prose; rather, thought is essentially metaphorical as humans try to imagine the “more” to their experience. Thus, a performance of Paul would have to take into account the rhetorical strategies Paul used in inventing his speech as he envisioned his audience and of what he wanted to persuade them. Further, by recognizing the original bodily basis for metaphors, one can actually suggest the options of physical movement for the performer as well as the imaginative leaps achieved by these metaphoric motions. The texts may well be mute but, for those who have ears and ipods, the echoes are hardly silent.