

The theological librarian as mediator of religious meaning: insights from the ancient world

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The movie *Central Station* is a powerful story about the power of the written word and its creator. One of the key characters is Dora, a retired schoolteacher, who makes a living at Rio de Janeiro's central railway station writing letters for its illiterate, impoverished people. She appears in the early stages of the movie as a struggling character really indifferent to others. Dora arbitrarily chooses to send the letters of those who have paid her to do so. One of those who employs her services is Ana who dictates a letter to be sent to the father of her son, Josue who has also accompanied her to the station. That day after leaving the station Ana is hit and killed by a bus. Josue is left wandering aimlessly around the station. After initially resisting the temptation to make a quick profit from selling the lad, Dora decides to return the boy to his father who lives in Brazil's Northeast. So begins a fascinating journey.

The journey theme, which weaves throughout the movie, is more than a *physical* one. It is one of encounter, spiritual rebirth, discovery of roots and commitment. In the background of the journey of self-discovery in which Josue and Dora are engaged, there are reminders in the film of a journey in which the country and its people also seem engaged. Undergirding this journey motif is another: This has to do with the power of the letter and the letter writer. At a deeper level, the movie in fact is about the written text and those who mediate it.

Dora holds the key with which Josue can retrieve an identity that has become confused by the sudden and tragic death of his mother. As she provides the possibility for Josue to locate his father, his only family and so find meaning, she unwittingly reveals in a predominantly illiterate society the power of writing. In a world in which the written word was mysterious, Dora wrestles, purifies, communicates and journeys with it. In fact, the journey that dominates the movie is Dora's. Initially, she appears as a wizened and altruistic person, doing a service for the poor. But a sinister side to her emerges. The poor can be taken advantage of and (in the case of the motherless Josue) sold. Slowly, however it is in her relationship with Josue and through his search that Dora changes and moves through to conversion. An inner beauty gradually unfolds, as she becomes Josue's travelling companion and co-searcher.

Central Station is an allegory for what happens in the theological library. It is a place where the power of words enables searchers to recover or uncover religious truth. As mediators of words, the theological librarian is a privileged partner and colleague in this search, and can be as deeply touched and converted in the quest for the words' meaning as those considered as the library's 'clients.'

These important themes associated with the power of writing echoed in *Central Station* are not new. These are ancient themes. I would like to invite you on a journey, a brief one, parallel to Dora's. On this journey, we will reclaim those insights which some of the earliest, ancient communicators and mediators of meaning offer us. From ancient sites in Turkey, Egypt

and the Greco-Roman world there are insights which can speak to all of us concerned with enabling companion searchers to derive meaning in their religious quest through their engagement with the visual symbols and written words of our culture.

A brief word to situate us historically. The first evidence of *homo sapiens* from c 400 000 BCE heralds the beginning of human consciousness, the capacity of critical self-reflection and the use of art and language to communicate symbols of meaning, especially what I would call 'religious meaning.' The earliest example of writing occurs in the Ancient Near East (ANE) in Egypt and Mesopotamia in the 4th Millenium BCE. Originally pictographic, this form of writing symbolised trading objects. Scribes ciphered these more rapidly, and words were invented as a shorthand substitute for these pictures and the language of the actual transaction. Written words symbolised the event and a New World of communication was invented.

This significant linguistic moment in human history occurred for *pragmatic* reasons: the need for survival and human interchange. Language was the product of community living and the desire for a documented record of communication in case of trading disputes. It must be remembered that this development of language in external form, from pictographs to words around 3000 BCE, must be set against the earliest forms of visual communication in the form of rock art c 20 000 years ago in Europe. In Australia, some would argue that the rock art of the first aborigines predates this by about 10 000 years.

My specific focus though will be on ANE, the world around the Mediterranean. My interest is (1) with earliest expressions of religious art in Anatolia (roughly, present day Turkey), (2) the development of writing in the ANE, especially with some of the temple inscriptions in Egypt, and (3) the archaeological evidence available today of public inscriptions and libraries in the Greco-Roman world, the evidence of some of the ancient libraries which are archaeologically accessible to us and what these might say to a group of librarians gathered from around the Pacific.

1. Earliest expressions of ANE Art -- Ankara, Turkey, Museum of Anatolian Civilization

In the Museum of Anatolian Civilization in Ankara, Turkey, an enthroned goddess 20cm high from the first half of 6th millenium BCE is displayed. Unearthed in Catalhoyuk it shows the goddess giving birth and enthroned between two felines. This small and earliest example of Anatolian religious art begins a theme often repeated in Anatolia -- the spread of a goddess religion dedicated to Cybele. Another example is the marble double-headed figure of mother and maiden Cybele. This mysterious piece of art stands about 17.2 cm, was again excavated from Catalhoyuk and is also dated to the first half of 6th Millenium. Other goddess figurines in the museum continue to emphasise similar ideas: the concern over fertility, the connection which the goddess had on human affairs and the anthropomorphic traits of the Cybele figurines. These religious figures illustrate the importance of fertility and national survival, the need to externalise or publicly demonstrate religious sentiment, the early dominance of a goddess religious tradition in which the



1. archaic figure found near the Parthenon.

deity is a nurturing figure. This is a long way from the theological library, but illustrates themes that lie at the heart of the library and those who minister within it.

2. Egyptian Art, the Pharaohs and Gods

In the ancient world, religion and life were intermingled. Theology was not something with which only students of theology or officially designated religious officials were concerned. The divinities affected the world of humans, and were represented in the relationship of the kings with their gods. The finest examples of this are in Egypt and, of the countless illustrations that can be seen by visitors today, I choose three:

Near Luxor, about 600 kms South of Cairo on the Nile River, in the Valley of the Kings in the 13th cent BCE royal mortuary temple of Ramesses II (Ramesseum) is an engraving inside one of the chapels which shows the pharaoh making an offering to the god and in return receiving sexual procreative power for the afterlife. Such scenes - of the Pharaoh offering to the gods and receiving the divine gift - are constantly repeated throughout Egypt.

Another example is the depiction of the god Amun, the principal or primeval Egyptian deity, in one of the temples of Luxor offering life to the Pharaoh Seti I (1290-1279) who makes an offering to the god. They are interpretations of the Pharaoh as symbolic representation of the people and his dependency on divine beneficence to guarantee life and paternity.

This engraving reflects a most profound and sophisticated theology about life and breath, which indirectly links to the origin and power of words. The ancients regarded breath as the source of life and reflection of a person's true character. What a person thought and felt was evidenced in the sounds and words which one emitted because of breath. Breath was also capable of independent existence and yet always remained connected to the person. Think of the breath on a cold morning! The ancients' tendency to anthropomorphise their gods allowed them to see the central role which breath played in divine self-communication. The breath of the gods communicated life, was of the gods, yet capable of independent existence. Human breath shared in the divine breath. The action of Amun in the above situation reflects this appreciation.

On a second wall at Luxor is a remarkable and beautiful image of another Egyptian deity, Thoth (or the Ibis God). He is depicted tracing the name of the Pharaoh (in this case, Seti I) on to the tree of life. This vision of Thoth with writing stylus carefully inscribing the Pharaoh's name is very moving and introduces us to a profound insight into the way the Egyptians thought of writing.

Thoth was the divine communicator of the Egyptian gods and the earlier equivalent of Hermes in the Greek world. Writing was regarded as a divine act, worthy of the gods. Thoth was considered as the inventor of writing and the protector of scribes, the ancient predecessors of today's theological librarian. In fact, he was the tongue and heart of Amun (or Re).

There is another example of Egyptian art. This is found at Timna in an ancient copper mine and industrial area of a desert area in present day Southern Israel. Here there is a remarkable 13th cent BCE rock engraving of Ramases III making an offering to the goddess Hathor. Nearby is a 12th-13th cent BCE temple to the goddess, modeled on the ancient Egyptian temples. The pattern of this temple was duplicated later by the Israelites in the building of their

temples. Egyptian influence did not remain only within the region of present-day Egypt. It provided the basis for a later religious expression.

All these religious images of Egyptian influence, the interactions of the gods with the Pharaohs, the engraving of Hathor and her small temple not far away, are reminders of how much religion penetrated the ordinary commercial affairs of the ancient world, a theme often repeated in Egyptian art and literature. Thoth is a reminder of the way the Egyptians saw writing -- as an act in which gods communicated to human beings. These insights impact on the role of those who handle and deal with writing today, especially on how libraries and librarians might be appreciated.

3. Ancient Libraries

In this final section I would like to look at some extant ancient public inscriptions and libraries accessible to us today and explore the insights they offer us in our quest to understand something of the function of libraries and those who work within them.



Delphi:

One of the most beautiful sites of ancient Greece, Delphi is about 200 kms NW of Athens and regarded as the centre of the world. It is the sanctuary of the famous oracle who provided revered answers to pilgrims' questions. A central part of the site is the 6th cent BCE Temple to Apollo. On the west side of the Temple is a 458 BCE polygonal retaining wall that holds family inscriptions, statements about the emancipation of slaves and other public records. The wall acted as a kind of local newspaper. More importantly, though, it demonstrates how much the sacred and secular were intertwined. People felt a need to give public thanks to the deity for the benefits they received and which they attributed to the gods (in this case, Apollo). The retaining wall is eloquent testimony to the populace's recognition of their connection to the religious world and the part which the gods played in human affairs

Pergamum:

About 250 kms SW of Istanbul lies Pergamum, first settled in 8th cent BCE. Pergamum came to prominence under Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. After the break up of the Greek empire on Alexander's death, it was ruled over by Lysimachus, one of Alexander's generals, and reached its zenith under the reign of Eumenes II (197-160 BCE). Eumenes was a bibliophile. On the acropolis of Pergamum, he built a library which held around 200 000 volumes and challenged the greatest library in the world at Alexandria (700 000 books). Because the Alexandrians were frightened of the challenge of the Pergamum library, they cut off the supply of papyrus reeds from the Nile. Eumenes responded and through his scientists invented *pergamena*, writing material that came from the treated skins of animals and known as *parchment*. Later Marc Antony pillaged the Pergamum library to replace volumes destroyed in fires in Cleopatra's library in Alexandria. This is one of the earliest examples of book stealing on a massive scale and illustrates the lengths which some people will go to for love!

At the base of the Acropolis there still exists the remains of Pergamum's healing centre, called the *Asclepieum*, dating from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The centre, named

after the god Asclepius, consists of several religious shrines, a sacred fountain and water source and a theatre that seats 3500. Next to the theatre was a library, which housed medical texts and copies of the classics for the entertainment of the patients. The inscriptions at Delphi and the two libraries at Pergamum are reminders of the extent reading and libraries were associated with the religious and healing centres of the city. This leads us to an important insight from the ancient world: All libraries were theological in the ancient world and connected with the holistic healing of people.

Qumran:

On the shores of the Dead Sea is the archaeological site of Khirbet Qumran, which is believed to have once been a monastery of the Essene community, settled in the 1st cent BCE and remained occupied into the 1st cent CE. This community sought to live a life of purity and expectation as they awaited their Messiah. They envisaged a final apocalyptic battle waged between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, with the Children of Light winning. Their Spartan lifestyle is reflected in the remains of the buildings that date back to this period. One of the rooms held a 5 m table and a few inkwells. It is believed that here were written the scrolls which were finally hidden in nearby caves.

The writings of Qumran remind us how much writing has been associated with preservation of religious identity. Discipline undertaken by community members ensured that writings reflected their religious affiliation and commitment to God.

Ephesus:

The final library that I would like to reflect on is the famous Celsus library at Ephesus, which is on the coast of Western Turkey and c 400 kms SW of Istanbul. Ephesus had attracted settlers from the earliest years. It was located and offered a sheltered harbour on the mouth of the river Meandar and provided an important trading link and place of rest for merchants en route to the great cities of the Middle East. It was also the centre of the worship of the goddess Cybele -- with whom I began this paper. It is no wonder that Ephesus was chosen for the famous Council of Ephesus which decided on the nature of the role of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. We come full circle. In fact next to Ephesus is the Artemision, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world -- the cult centre for the goddess Artemis. For our purposes, Ephesus has one of the most elegant ancient libraries still visible today, the library of Celsus, built in 110 CE by the Consul Aquila to honour his father, Celsus governor of the Roman province of Asia (105-7 CE) and whose sarcophagus was discovered at the turn of this century in the West apsidal wall of the library.

The Celsus library held 12 000 scrolls kept in rows in niches in the walls of the inner chamber. Upper level galleries, similar to what exists in libraries today, provided access to the niches in this level. Between the inner and outer walls of the library an air gap of 1m protected the scrolls from humidity and sudden temperature variations. As at Pergamum, a librarian handed the scrolls to the readers. More significantly, the library was positioned in a most imposing location at the archaeological site: on the main marble street as the famous theatre (which held 25 000 people) and the upper agora, next to the lower agora, across the street from the public toilets, wealthy residential area and brothel.

With this study of the Celsus library, the shape of and the practice within the modern library starts to emerge more clearly. The architecture of Ephesus' Celsus library reflects something of the modern theological library, anticipates the role of the librarian, and confirms the li-

brary's connection to the major social interests which lay at the heart of the commercial and religious life of the city.

4. The Theological Librarian: Mediator of Religious Meaning.

In the façade of the Celsus library are the replicas of four sculptures of female figures. The originals are in the Ephesus museum in Vienna. Each figure represents the central gifts which is hoped that users of the library would receive. They also sum up the key qualities which those that orchestrate or coordinate the library mediate to those they assist in the library. The four female figures represent *sophia* (wisdom), *arete* (goodness), *episteme* (knowledge) *ennoia* (thought).

Today's library, especially a theological library or resource, is not concerned with just providing access to information, or 'knowledge' (*episteme*). While often this is the immediate intent of the library's design, more is aimed for in the engagement. Librarians are concerned with connecting people to the deepest source of knowledge, namely wisdom (*sophia*), goodness (*arete*) and thought (*ennoia*). These gifts assist people to develop self-reflection which enables them to understand their world, grow in appreciation for it, and act in a way which will enhance community. It is with this that I return to an earlier reflection on the Cybele figurines of Ankara's Anatolian Civilisation Museum.

In the ancient world, it seems (at least from this necessarily limited selection that I have made) that libraries were located next to the religious heart of the urban world and commercial agora. They reflected the ancient belief that economics, politics and religion were intertwined. In them people sought answers to questions, and writing, from the Egyptian contribution, was an act of the divine and sacred. Ancient libraries were theological in this sense. They enabled people to be in touch with the deepest thoughts and insights of the human spirit, which ultimately were a reflection of the divine and breath of the sacred. This suggests that librarians of a theology library and resource people who work in a theological resource centre are not simply functionaries facilitating borrowing procedures for clients. From this brief archaeological tour, I would suggest there is something more profound and sacred operating.

The images of Cybele in the Ankara Museum of Anatolian Civilisations and Thoth at Abydos in Upper Egypt can also be images of the librarian. These are the ancient forebears of today's theological librarians invited to provide an atmosphere of religious nurture and, through easing the process by which others engage those written words that have inspired the human spirit and forged identity, mediate religious meaning. In short, the library is a religious place and those that work there sacred people.

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[Editor's note : The illustrations used in this item are not reproductions of those used by Michael in his conference presentation.]