The Implications of "Orality" for Studies of the Biblical Text

Holly E. Hearon

Efforts to examine the oral aspect of biblical texts date to the early part of the twentieth century. Since then, the tide of studies has flowed and ebbed. A swirl of activity during the 1950's and 60's slowed to a drizzle in the 70's and early 80's. This drought was broken with the appearance in 1983 of the ground-breaking study by Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel,* which marked the beginning of biblical scholars' growing awareness of and engagement with the works of Eric Havelock, Milman Parry, Albert Lord, Ruth Finnegan, Jack Goody, and Walter Ong—and in subsequent years, it should be added, the works of John Miles Foley. Since then the flow of studies has steadily increased, surpassing the efforts of any previous decade. Needless to say, it is hoped that the twenty-first century will prove as fruitful as the late twentieth century for studies of the oral aspects of biblical texts.

My goal in this article is to highlight some of the ways in which the application of studies in oral tradition to biblical texts has begun to foment a shift in thinking among biblical scholars by encouraging us to look at the biblical texts in relation to their oral-aural contexts and by considering how these oral-aural texts functioned in the ancient world. Because these studies have taken us in many different directions, my paper is structured as a series of "sound bytes" loosely grafted together. My intent is to be suggestive rather than comprehensive, to describe some of the places we have been and some of the places we have yet to go. Before I begin, let me offer three caveats. First, most of my comments will be directed towards studies of the Second Testament, as this is the locus of my own research. Nonetheless, a number of issues that I raise find resonance in both Testaments. Second, while I will cite some studies, many more will be referenced only by allusion; if the study that has been central to your work, or perhaps is your work, is omitted, I beg your pardon. Finally, while I have endeavored to

represent a spectrum of perspectives in my comments, my bias will no doubt be evident to those who have ears to hear. In this respect I do not beg your pardon, but your indulgence.

Written Remains

I begin with the written remains, because, in the end, that is what we have: written remains of texts that look nothing at all like what we are used to seeing when we encounter a written page or printed text. These written remains are not divided into chapters or paragraphs, they exhibit no punctuation and provide no spaces between words. The sheer visual impact of letter after letter without interruption is overwhelming. Yet it is the visual impact of the page that orients us towards their function. Because the structure of the text cannot be discerned from the construction of the physical page, we must discover it another way. As Paul Achtemeier (1990) has proposed, and Bernard Brandon Scott and Margaret Dean (1996) have demonstrated, one of the ways in which the structure of these texts is revealed is through sound. It is little wonder, then, that reading aloud was, if not the exclusive practice in the ancient Mediterranean world, at least the normative practice. This reality invites us not only to see, but also to hear our "written remains" and to experience them in relation to aural rather than visual cues by letting our ear be guided from sound to sound rather than our eye from chirograph to chirograph. As Scott and Dean have proposed, these cues can add to our understanding of how the rhetorical structure of the texts is shaped, for example, through patterns of repetition constructed around sound.

Attentiveness to the primarily aural nature of our "written remains" signals to us their close relationship with oral text. Since these "written remains" were largely dictated, the "remains" are, in fact, texts that began in oral expression and were "actualized" in performance through the re-oralization of the words. To view them wholly as written texts, then, is to miss an important dimension of their function and to misconstrue how they were experienced in the ancient Mediterranean world.

The Oral and the Written "Text"

Over the past 60 years biblical scholars have developed a much greater appreciation of the close relationship between oral and written text, a

conversation stimulated in no small part by Werner Kelber.[1] The individual who has articulated, perhaps most clearly, the close relationship between oral and written text is Vernon Robbins. Robbins sees this close relationship arising from what he describes as the "rhetorical culture" of the ancient world, a culture based in the art of recitation (1993:116). According to Robbins "rhetorical culture" uses both written and oral language, as well as written and oral sources and traditions, interactively. There is, indeed, an *expectation* that oral traditions will appear in written texts and written traditions will be heard in oral texts. The distinction between the two in terms of content and structure, therefore, is blurred; nor can any clear sequence of, for example, first oral, then written be discerned. In "rhetorical culture" the oral and the written text are bound together in a dynamic relationship.

The impact of this insight for studies of biblical texts is profound. It disrupts any notion of a clear distinction between an "oral phase" and a "written" phase in the transmission of the biblical text and opens up at least the possibility of written texts—such as Q, if indeed "Q" was a written text—that existed but are long since lost to us. This, however, is "old news." The other possibility is potentially more disruptive to the canons of biblical scholarship—that is the possibility that the relationship between the Gospels rests in performance rather than written texts. This possibility has found confirmation in a presentation by James Dunn in 2000 to the Society of Biblical Literature. Dunn undertook a close examination of the differences between versions of stories found in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. He noted that many of the differences are "so inconsequential" that it is difficult to argue why they would have been made. Redaction criticism has long focused on the "consequential" changes made to each text by their respective authors, but the inconsequential changes have slipped by unnoticed. Dunn argued that a plausible explanation for these differences is that "Matthew and Luke knew their own (oral) versions of the story and drew on them primarily or as well. . . . Alternatively it could be that they followed Mark in oral mode . . . as a storyteller would" (2000:302). The possibility that the similarities between the Gospels rest not on literary dependence but on shared tradition transmitted as oral text offers a small but significant shift in balance. The two-source hypothesis has tended to keep us focused on the "written" dimension of rhetorical culture; Dunn's proposal brings into sharp focus the "oral-aural" dimension.

---

[1] See especially Kelber 1983, 1987, 1994a and b, and 1999.

The Aural Function of Text

Vernon Robbins has identified the oral-aural dimension of our "written remains" as closely related to their function in rhetorical culture as ideological rationale "generated through rhetorical elaboration in support of particular social postures" (1993:140; see also Horsley and Draper 1999:ch. 7). Texts are partisan. They are embedded in and responding to particular social and historical contexts in ways that are value-laden. This requires us to do more than establish the words of our texts, as Richard Horsley and Jonathon Draper remind us. It also requires us to establish the function of the communication in the historical social context and to see, if not a direct relationship, then a dynamic relationship between words and context. Attention to the oral-aural function of the text can offer insight into both the context that is referenced and how that context is reimagined through the text. If the spoken word is intended to lend support to particular "social postures" it must, at one and the same time, reflect the context in a way that hearers will recognize and with which they will identify, and engage the hearers to a degree sufficient to create in them the capacity to entertain new social boundaries (Robbins 1993:146, Horsley and Draper 1999:295). Our "oral and aural written remains," then, belong to an act of social construction, an act that is undertaken through performance.

Performance

The oral-aural nature of our "written remains" underscores their existence in performance—they must be understood in terms of the interaction between a performer and an audience, and the tangled web of discourse and experience that binds them together in a particular place and time (Horsley and Draper 1999:ch. 7). Margaret Mills cautions us that it is necessary to have specific ethnographic information before we make assertions about an audience, and performer (1990:235). For biblical scholars, this task is complicated exponentially because we can only glimpse performer, audience, and context through reconstructions based on fragments of literary and material remains. It is, nonetheless, an important part of the task. To understand a word as "spoken" is to recognize that it references an immediate social context, described by the location of a performer and audience in a specific place and time. To complicate things further, this performance context is not stable. It shifts as the performer, audience, and occasion shift: who is present with whom and under what

circumstances. There is, then, no fixed relationship between content and setting, performer and audience (Long 1976b:40). They are variable, and each new performance context requires a re-examination of how these elements are engaged.

Yet another dimension of the performance context is the act of performance itself. Anne Wire has observed that "writing . . . limits a story by recording only words, whereas storytelling depends for effective communication as much on the speaker's tone, volume, pace, gestures and embodiment of direct discourse as on the words spoken" (2002:4). This is another dynamic that is difficult for us to recover, but is important for us to imagine. Whit Shiner, for example, has culled ancient texts for indications of performance strategies—modulation of voice, use of gesture, and the crafted interaction between performer and audience. The impact of performance strategy on the spoken word shapes its capacity to affectively move an audience and cannot be separated from our understanding and analysis of "text."

The variable elements that compose a performance context also point to the possibility that each new performance context will call for a new formulation of the "text" to accommodate the shift in performer, audience, and context (Loubser 1993:35, Dewey 1994:157-58). The hearers, too, will lend shape to the text by interjecting comments while the performer, in turn, will be forced to adapt the text to the shifting demands of the audience (Long 1976a:190-91; Dewey 1994:151). The "actualization" of our "written remains" in performance, then, introduces to them an element of instability. New variables will be created, in addition, by the way in which each text is "framed" by the surrounding material. All of this serves to undermine past (and present) efforts at identifying an "original text" no matter how stable the tradition may be. Yet, in the words of Robert Coote (1976:60-61): "if the tradition of [a text's] transmission accepted and produced reformulations and preserved its multiforms, why should greater importance be imputed to the hypothetical original than the ancients thought it had?"

Transmission of the Text

The existence of multiforms brings us to the question of textual transmission. The implications of this question range far beyond technology to reconstructions of communication practice. They also touch on our understanding of the nature and organization of early Christian communities.

There are three primary theories of transmission that have been put forward over the years: (1) transmission as a dynamic, open process

(Bultmann,); (2) transmission as a rigidly controlled process reaching back to eyewitnesses (Gerhardsson and Reisenfeld); (3) transmission as an informal, controlled process (Bailey). There is not time to lift up all the arguments associated with each proposal; let me instead raise some of the issues prompted by these proposals in recent years. The primary tension that dominates discussions about transmission of the tradition concerns the role of the community versus the role of the individual. Each side in these conversations, it should be mentioned, represents an attempt to understand the process of transmission in historical social context.

Among the most recent proponents of the "eyewitness" model is Samuel Byrskog. One of the things that sets Byrskog apart from earlier proponents of this model is his use of studies in memory. Drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, he states that "groups and cultures do not remember and recall; individuals do" (2000:225). For Byrskog, then, tradition can ultimately be traced through those individuals who are the bearers of tradition for the community (so also Nielsen 1954:30). The importance of this trajectory is that it provides continuity between the past and the present: "The deepest continuity with the past was not in memory as such but in mimesis, not in passive remembrance, but in imitation" (197) and "What we have is 'memorative literature,' written from memory to memory" (127). While acknowledging that the performance of tradition generates "multivocal and contestive interpretations in diverse contexts" (139, here following the work of Mills), Byrskog ultimately wants to argue for a line of tradition that is transmitted from its source (Jesus) through eyewitnesses (Peter) to text (Mark).

In contrast, Horsley and Draper argue that since composition cannot be differentiated from performance, transmission reflects a "collective cultural enterprise" embedded in "communal memory" (1997:7). Proponents of this view, among them Werner Kelber, emphasize the variety of ways in which the community exerts control over the shape of memory. Øivind Andersen, for example, while recognizing the importance of the role played by those who are designated as "bearers of the tradition" notes that, even so, memory is dependent upon the collective (1991:21): "while one member may serve as "memory" the memory functions only if it has meaning for the body." William S. Taylor, speaking to the role of the individual, adds that memory is a "product of the habits of thinking, attitudes of mind, and emotional patterns created in the individual by the society of which he is a part. They clearly reflect the cultural setting to which he belongs" (1959:472).

I have polemicized this perhaps more than is necessary, but with a purpose. It comes down to a matter of control over the sanctity of the

tradition.   On the one hand are those who argue that the "tradition"—however defined—was carefully preserved and transmitted, beginning with eyewitnesses who handed the tradition on to authorized individuals and thus preserved it from corruption. On the other hand are those who emphasize the role of the community in giving shape to tradition, as it was contested between and within groups who were negotiating both meaning and structure, in part, through the use of tradition.

What is worth noting is that in both lines of argument, the role of memory is beginning to take a central role. In each case, memory is seen as a means of constructing a bridge between past events and present experience, but how that bridge is constructed differs widely. I suspect that its construction is closely tied to how it is experienced by the present interpreters. While the appeal to memory does not bring resolution to the "divide" between these two approaches, it does demonstrate one way in which the conversation is being refined as we move away from envisioning "text" and "tradition" as objects that can be neatly packaged and handed on and become increasingly sensitive to the complex web of forces that give them shape.

More Polemic

One of the things that is appealing about speaking in terms of "rhetorical culture" is that it neatly sidesteps the need to engage the question of whether there is, in the context of rhetorical culture, any necessary distinction between oral and written text. For some, the answer is "no"; the distinction is viewed as unhelpful because it creates an unnecessary divide and ultimately proves unproductive since what is left to us are the written remains of rhetorical culture. For others, the answer is "yes." For them the distinctions between oral and written point to a differential in terms of access and power.

Studies of literacy in the ancient Mediterranean world place the number of people who could read and/or write at somewhere around 5%, with a somewhat higher percentage projected for urban males (Rohrbaugh 1993:115, Bar-Ilan 1992:56; Harris 1986:267 suggests 15% for urban males). Since those who did not read or write could hire a scribe, production did not belong to the literate alone, but it did belong to those who could afford to pay a scribe, and who, it must be assumed, had access to someone who could subsequently perform the written text through recitation. Not to underestimate the powers of patronage, this number must have remained small. When we speak of the close relationship between oral and written

texts, therefore, we need to recognize that the "written texts" were relatively few—those responsible for the creation of these written texts made up less than a handful of the population, and of this group the vast majority were male. Thus it is important to raise the question of whose voice is represented in our "written remains." Joanna Dewey, for example, has observed that few stories about women appear in our texts and that their role tends to be minimized. She notes that studies of European tales and their shifts from oral to written text reveals a substantial reduction in the number of stories that feature women and, in addition, that women assume more passive roles within the stories (1996:72). She proposes that as traditions move from oral to written text in the "rhetorical culture" of the ancient Mediterranean world a similar shift may have occurred (*ibid.*:74).

Other distinctions between written and oral text have been noted as well. For example, written texts are "fixed" in a way that oral text is not. As Werner Kelber has observed (1983:176), however much the written text may be modified in performance, there remains a fixed original against which any subsequent version may be checked. This existence of the text in time and space outside of performance lends the text a kind of permanence that is not shared by oral text. In addition, written texts allow people who have never met to have access to the same narrative (see Hollander 2000:356). In this respect, the text takes on a life of its own and has the capacity to assume an authority that is not tied directly to interaction between a performer and audience. In contrast, oral text is, by definition, dependent upon the presence of a narrator and an audience in the same physical space for voice and capacity to influence (Long 1976a:188). These differences should encourage us to guard against blurring the lines between oral and written text to the point where all distinction is lost.

Conclusions

What began some sixty plus years ago as an exploration of oral tradition in the biblical text has brought us to a point where we now see our "written remains" as evidence of an oral-aural culture in which written and oral texts and traditions were bound together in a dynamic relationship. This offers us opportunities to see and hear our written texts in new ways: as patterns of sound bent on the task of persuasion in particular social historical contexts where performer and audience entered the world of the text in order to give "meaning and power to a way of life, to a cosmos become real in performance," to borrow the words of Joanna Dewey (1994:152). It also presses us to become even more attentive to the ways in which written and

oral text differ—a challenge placed before us still by Werner Kelber. The same traditions may appear in both; both may employ written and oral language; and because both are performed orally, both will be heard. Yet differences remain, not least of which are those related to power and access. To hear those other voices, we need to continue our search for oral texts and traditions in our "written remains," and to construct performance contexts that are not bound by the frame prescribed by biblical texts (see, e.g., Hearon 2004). This may, perhaps, bring us closer to the polemical context in which all of these texts were heard.[2]

Christian Theological Seminary

References

Achtemeier 1990   Paul J. Achtemeier. "*Omne Verbum Sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 109:3-27.

Andersen 1991   Øivind Andersen. "Oral Tradition." In *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*. Ed. by Henry Wansbrough. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series, 64. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. pp. 17-58.

Bailey 1991   Kenneith E. Bailey. "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels." *Asia Journal of Theology*, 5:34-54.

Bar-Ilan 1992   Meir Bar-Ilan. "Illiteracy in the Land of Israel in the First Centuries C.E." In *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society*. Vol. 2. Ed. by Simcha Fishbane, Stuart Schoenfeld, and Alain Goldschläger. Hoboken, NJ: KTAV. pp. 46-61.

Byrskog 2000   Samuel Byrskog. *Story as History, History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*. Leiden: Brill.

Bultmann 1963   Rudolf Bultmann. *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Trans. by John Marsh. New York: Harper and Row.

---

[2] Presented at "Orality, Narrativity, Memory: A Tribute to the Scholarship of Werner Kelber," Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, Georgia, November 23, 2003.

Coote 1976   Robert B. Coote. "The Application of Oral Theory to Biblical Hebrew Literature." *Semeia*, 5:51-64.

Dewey 1994   Joanna Dewey. "The Gospel of Mark as Oral/Aural Event: Implications for Interpretation." In *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*. Ed. by Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press. pp. 145-63.

Dewey 1996   _____. "From Storytelling to Written Text: The Loss of Early Christian Women's Voices." *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 26:71-78.

Dunn 2000   James D. G. Dunn. "Jesus in Oral Memory: The Initial Stages of the Jesus Tradition." *Society of Biblical Literature 2000 Seminar Papers*, 39:287-326.

Gerhardsson 1961   Birger Gerhardsson. *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*. Lund: Gleerup.

Gerhardsson 1964   _____. *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*. Coniectanea Neotestamentica. Lund: Gleerup.

Gerhardsson 1986   _____. *The Gospel Tradition*. Malmo: Gleerup.

Gerhardsson 2001   _____. *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Harris 1986   William V. Harris. *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hearon 2004   Holly E. Hearon. "Functions of the Mary Magdalene Tradition in Storytelling Circles." In her *The Mary Magdalene Tradition: Witness and Counter-Witness in Early Christian Communities*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press. pp. 77-100.

Hollander 2000   Harm W. Hollander. "The Words of Jesus: From Oral Tradition to Written Record in Paul and Q." *Novum Testamentum*, 42:340-57.

Horsley and Draper 1999   Richard A. Horsley and Jonathon A. Draper. *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

Kelber 1983   Werner H. Kelber. *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Rpt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Kelber 1987   _____. "The Authority of the Word in St. John's Gospel." *Oral Tradition*, 2:108-31.

Kelber 1994a   _____. "Jesus and Tradition: Words in Time, Words in Space." *Semeia*, 65:139-67.

Kelber 1994b   _____. "Modalities of Communication, Cognition, and Physiology of Perception: Orality, Rhetoric, Scribality." *Semeia*, 65:193-216.

Kelber 1999   _____. "The Quest for the Historical Jesus from the Perspectives of Medieval, Modern, and Post-Enlightenment Readings, and in View of Ancient, Oral Aesthetics." In *The Jesus Controversy: Perspectives in Conflict*. Ed. by John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, and Werner H. Kelber. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International. Ch. 3.

Long 1976a   Burke O. Long. "Recent Field Studies in Oral Literature and Their Bearing on Old Testament Criticism." *Vetus Testamentum*, 26:187-98.

Long 1976b   _____. "Recent Field Studies in Oral Literature and the Question of *Sitz im Leben*." *Semeia*, 5:35-49.

Loubser 1993   J. A. Loubser. "Orality and Pauline 'Christology': Some Hermeneutical Implications." *Scriptura*, 47:25-51.

Mills 1990   Margaret A. Mills. "Domains of Folkloristic Concern: Interpretation of Scriptures." In *Text and Tradition*. Ed. by Susan Niditch. Atlanta: Scholars Press. pp. 231-41.

Nielsen 1954   Eduard Nielsen. *Oral Tradition*. Studies in Biblical Theology, 11. London: SCM.

Reisenfeld 1970   Harald Reisenfeld. *The Gospel Tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Robbins 1993   Vernon K. Robbins. "Probymnastic Rhetorical Composition and Pre-Gospel Traditions: A New Approach." In *The Synoptic Gospels*. Ed. by Camille Focant. Leuven: Leuven University Press. pp. 111-47.

Rohrbaugh 1993   Richard L. Rohrbaugh. "The Social Location of the Marcan Audience." *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 23:114-27.

Scott and Dean 1996   Bernard Brandon Scott and Margaret E. Dean. "A Sound Map of the Sermon on the Mount." In *Treasures New and Old: Contributions to Matthean Studies*. Ed. by David R. Bauer and Mark Allan Powell. Atlanta: Scholars Press. pp. 311-78.

Shiner 2003   Whitney Shiner. *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

Taylor 1959   William S. Taylor. "Memory and the Gospel Tradition." *Theology Today*, 15:170-79.

Wire 2002   Antoinette Clark Wire. *Holy Lives, Holy Deaths: A Close Hearing of Early Jewish Storytellers*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.