



# Textuality and orality in the Bible



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*'You want to make the Bible come alive? I didn't know it had died. In fact, I had never even heard that it was ill. Who was the attending physician at the Bible's demise? No, I can't make the Bible come alive for anyone. The Bible is already alive. It makes me come alive.'* (RC Sproul)<sup>1</sup>

*'Chronological Bible Storying is changing Christian communication forever. Emphasis on oral learning preferences is the next wave of missions advance... the beloved "three points and a poem" is dead; long live the chronological narrative!'* (M Snowden)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The feisty remarks above from RC Sproul and Mark Snowden share a passion to redeem the stereotype of the Bible as a dead book. Yet their proposals for recovering the dynamism of God's living Word are rather different. Sproul, being a theologian of traditional persuasion, emphasises that the textuality of the Bible demands renewed commitment to reading and studying the Scriptures as God's written word. By contrast, Snowden is a missiologist who seeks to replace traditional methods of pedagogy with the newer practice of storying – skilled performance of God's oral word.

The purpose of offering these quotations is not to broaden the existing divide between advocates of textuality and orality, lesser still the proverbial gap between theology and missiology. I seek instead to re-examine certain assumptions about the Bible that underlie how advocates of textuality and orality methods seek scriptural support for their views. Rather than pitting these

modes of communication against each other in anachronistic ways, as is sometimes done, it is necessary to understand how they reinforce each other as a symbiosis in the Bible itself. As David Carr comments in this regard, '[S]ocieties with writing often have an intricate interplay of orality and textuality, where written texts are intensely oral, while even exclusively oral texts are deeply affected by written culture.'<sup>3</sup> That is to say, the Bible is God's oral address to his people which has been preserved for future generations as a written text. The need to hear and heed these words continually finds support in the Bible's many directives to memorise them, meditate upon them, and read them aloud – a rich combination of tasks that necessarily taps into orality and textuality as complementary dimensions of human experience.

The article will proceed in three sections. The first section will survey the diverse kinds of orality contained in the Bible's literary forms. The oral character of the Bible is found not just in narrative texts, but also in usually overlooked genres such as law, prophecy/apocalypse, epistle, and wisdom. The second section will explore the broader question of why the spoken nature of God's address has come down to us in written form. These observations about the nature of the Bible will afford an opportunity for the final section to evaluate the role that literacy has played in ancient and modern cultures. Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, among many others, have been influential in arguing that much of the world lies beyond the reach of the 'Gutenberg Galaxy'.<sup>4</sup> There is much truth to this view. I will also propose, however, that the methods

of orality and textuality ought to remain partners in mission since the Bible was always intended by God to leap off the page and arrest its audience in a personal encounter which includes both hearing and reading.<sup>5</sup>

## The Orality (?) of the Bible

Any discussion of orality must begin with the recognition that most of the Bible is prose narrative. The Old Testament begins with an unbroken story from creation (Genesis) all the way until Israel's post-exilic period (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther). Statistically speaking, books that are mostly narrative represent about 50 per cent of the Old Testament. This figure is mirrored by the fact that the narratives of the four Gospels and Acts compose approximately 55 per cent of the New Testament. As many advocates of orality- and story-based methods rightly note, the predominance of narrative in the Bible stands at odds with the Western modernist tendency to favour its non-narrative genres.<sup>6</sup> The result can be a truncated understanding of the 'gospel' as a series of abstract theological propositions distilled from Paul's letters rather than a concrete story about how Jesus Christ accomplishes God's plan of salvation.<sup>7</sup>

Two issues arise, though, when the Bible's abundance of narrative is offered as evidence that storytelling is the Bible's main method of propagating itself.<sup>8</sup> The first and more obvious issue is that the textuality of the Bible remains inescapable as a big book composed of 66 smaller books. Any proposal emphasising Scripture's own orality still needs to reckon with how its traditions have also been transmitted by written media and more than (though never less than) oral retelling. Indeed, the textuality of the Bible as preserver of its orality is predicated upon a second and more fundamental question – to what extent are oral traditions part of the fabric of the Bible itself? By limiting the discussion to narratives, especially the Bible's pithier stories, advocates of orality methods seem to underestimate the extent to which the Bible in its entirety could support their case. In short, it is not merely the Bible's shorter stories that were geared toward oral recitation for audiences that preferred hearing to reading, but also its longer stories, laws, prophecies, and wisdom literature.

The Bible's shorter stories originated in an oral setting.<sup>9</sup> Before Israel has even departed from Egypt, to name just one instance, Moses looks ahead to the Promised Land when parents must retell the exodus story to their children: 'When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. *And when your children ask you, "What does this ceremony mean to you?" then tell them, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians"*' (Exodus 12.25–27, NIV; italics added). Especially fascinating in this explanation of Passover is that Israel's dwellings in Egypt are both 'the houses of the Israelites' and 'our homes'; even though a

generation born in Canaan would have never lived in Egypt. Chronological precision becomes less important than transporting both the audience and their descendants back to Egypt, much like the imagined conversation between father and son in Deuteronomy 6.20–25. In these Old Testament passages as well as in Judaism more generally, dead and living generations are joined as God's singular people by addressing everyone in Israel's history as 'we/us' (e.g. Deuteronomy 5.3).

By way of corollary, the genre of Old Testament law also builds upon the oral delivery of a short story. Later in Exodus, God declares that the story of Israel's deliverance is of higher priority than the laws to be given: 'I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' (Exodus 20.2, NIV). It is not Moses who speaks here but the LORD himself. The laws following this declaration are therefore Israel's grateful response to deliverance rather than a legalistic means of earning it. These laws are not only grounded in a story of salvation – a feature unique to Israel's literature – but the legal codes of the Old Testament are distinctly personal for addressing a second-person audience of 'you' (e.g. Exodus 20.3–17; Deuteronomy 5.6–21).<sup>10</sup> Judicial codes from elsewhere in the ancient world, as in the laws of Hammurabi the Babylonian king, are promulgated impersonally from a human ruler to third-person citizens identified as 'he/ they'. In short, Israel is privileged among the nations to receive laws to 'you' that are directly from the King of the universe and set within the old, old story of how he saved 'you'.<sup>11</sup>

While the power of retelling shorter stories (e.g. Jesus' parables) has been generally recognised,<sup>12</sup> the more recent emergence of performance criticism has also shown that longer sections of text were also meant to be recounted orally,<sup>13</sup> both in narrative books taken as a whole and the non-narrative genres of prophecy/apocalypse, epistle and wisdom.<sup>14</sup> For biblical narratives, the New Testament books of Mark and Acts have received particular attention in how their authors likely intended them as oral performances or perhaps even dramatisations which interacted with their original audiences.<sup>15</sup> Among the prophetic/apocalyptic books, Jeremiah is representative in how the prophet's words first assume the form of spoken oracles from God to the peoples and their kings (Jeremiah 7.25–26) before later becoming a text with the help of Baruch the scribe (Jeremiah 36.1–3). However, they become spoken addresses again when Baruch's brother Seraiah takes a scroll of the oracles against Babylon (Jeremiah 50.1–51:58) to read publicly there as a sign of its impending fall (Jeremiah 51.59–64). The apocalyptic book of Revelation is similar in recording oral addresses that are later written down (Revelation 1.3, 11, 19), as well as adopting the form of a circular letter which was to be read aloud to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2–3).

## NOTES

1. RC Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), pp. 14–15.
2. M Snowden, 'Orality: The Next Wave of Missions Advance', *Mission Frontiers* 26 (February 2004), p. 14.
3. DM Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 7.
4. M McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); WJ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).
5. This both-and approach is also embraced by the International Network in their book, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (Bangalore: ION/ LCWE, 2005), pp. 11–12.
6. E.g. G Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First-Century Listeners* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2001); RA Jensen, *Telling the Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).
7. S McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).
8. As suggested by, for example, PF Koehler, *Telling God's Stories with Power: Biblical Storytelling in Oral Cultures* (Pasadena: William Carey, 2010), p. 29; M Novelli, *Shaped by the Story: Helping Students Encounter God in a New Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), p. 48.
9. W Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 11–17.
10. JG McConville, 'Singular Address in the Deuteronomical Law and the Politics of Legal

Administration', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 97 (2002), pp. 19–36.

11. D Patrick, *The Rhetoric of Revelation in the Hebrew Bible, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), pp. 74–75.

12. E.g. GM Burge, *Jesus, The Middle Eastern Storyteller: Uncovers the Ancient Culture, Discover Hidden Meanings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

13. The main works in performance criticism are published by Cascade Books (Eugene, OR) as part of an ongoing series, 'Biblical Performance Criticism: Orality, Memory, Translation, Rhetoric, Discourse.'

14. See JDG Dunn, 'Altering the Default Setting: Re-Envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition', *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003), pp. 139–75; Doan & Giles, *Prophets*, 9

15. WD Shiell, *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* (Biblical Interpretation Series, v.70 (Boston: Brill Academic, 2004); WT Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003). Note also, though, the cautions against overcorrecting toward 'pan-orality/pan-performance' view of the NT books from LW Hurtado, 'Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies? "Orality", "Performance" and Reading Texts in Early Christianity', *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014), pp. 321–40.

16. C Forbes, 'Ancient Rhetoric and Ancient Letters: Models for Reading Paul, and Their Limits', in *Paul and Rhetoric* (ed. J Paul Sampley and P Lampe; T&T Clark Biblical Studies; New York: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 148–49.

17. Carr, *Writing*, pp. 127–28.

18. JH Walton & Brent Sandy, *The Lost*

Besides the book of Revelation, the bidirectional relationship between written text and oral event is also found in other familiar specimens of the Greco-Roman epistolary form – the letters of the New Testament that Paul, Peter and other writers sent via couriers to read aloud before the congregations of the early Church (e.g. Acts 15.31; Colossians 4.16; 1 Thessalonians 5.27).<sup>16</sup> As a final example on the primacy of aural learning in the Bible's world, the wisdom sayings in Proverbs repeatedly command the audience to 'hear!' (e.g. 1.8; 4.1; 22.17). These calls to virtue are set in the context of everyday family life, whether directly as a summons from a male authority figure to younger charges to 'listen!' (e.g. 5.7), or indirectly when wisdom and folly are personified as women who 'call out' (9.3,15) to impressionable young men and invite them into their respective houses (9.4–6,16–18). The wisdom sayings of Proverbs certainly become a written text at some point in their transmission through history (25.1), but the focus of the book remains on inscribing its poetry 'on the tablet of your heart' (3.3; 7.3) as words to be memorised, recited and cherished.<sup>17</sup>

These observations across different biblical genres illustrate that orality is part and parcel of the written Bible. Given how the Bible evidently reflects the ancient preference for oral communication and learning by hearing,<sup>18</sup> the question inevitably becomes one of how and why Jews and Christians came to be 'people of the book'. The next section will address this issue in light of the modern assertion that written texts are becoming increasingly passé, the Bible most importantly among them.

## The Textuality of Orality and the Orality of Textuality

On one level the reasons why texts exist are self-evident. Much like advocates of orality methods still use print media to disseminate their ideas rather than only discussing them face-to-face, the Bible also seeks to speak broadly as God's revelation to the whole world. Beyond this truism about mass communication, however, the Bible records two other factors that led to oral sayings becoming written texts at certain historical junctures. These factors are not exclusive of one another and indeed worked together when in-person transmission proved to be inadequate for keeping alive these precious traditions. Put another way, one could summarise that the written production of the Bible was intended to preserve and reinforce its orality as a text to be continuously heard by all peoples.

The first reason for textualising the Bible was that the continuity of oral traditions was threatened when their gatekeepers began to depart from the scene. This could happen through the death of a scribal figure such as Moses, whose impending death led him to transcribe his farewell sermons in Deuteronomy and entrust them to the Levitical

priests who would recite them every seventh year at the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 31.9–13). The transmitter's death did not need to be imminent, however, for the threat of opposition to a scribe or prophetic figure would have also been a sufficient impetus for textualising oral traditions. When the original scroll of Jeremiah's words is read to King Jehoiakim, who then casts them into the fire, the LORD commands Jeremiah to dictate another scroll which contains additional words against the king (Jeremiah 36.21–32). Along the same lines, the writers of the four Gospels produced their books so that a newer generation of Christians would still have access to the words and deeds of Jesus after the eyewitnesses to his life were imprisoned or had passed on.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the gap of several decades between the earthly ministry of Jesus (~30–33 AD) and the writing of the Gospels (~65–95 AD) is not evidence that traditions about Jesus were corrupted or even invented by the early Christians, as sceptics think, but testifies instead to the dominance of oral traditions about Jesus in a cultural climate that preferred hearing to reading and writing. In this respect, recent New Testament scholarship has moved away from the anachronistic view that the Gospels were composed primarily as written texts for a particular church or community. Instead, several converging lines of evidence show that the Gospels were widely circulated as interlocking oral and written traditions among Christian assemblies in different places.<sup>20</sup>

The other reason for the Bible becoming a book lies in the need for oral traditions to travel where human speakers cannot. Texts can more easily cross physical borders, such as when the prophet Jeremiah is forbidden to enter the Temple and palace in Jerusalem where his words are to be proclaimed (Jeremiah 36.1–8). Or to cite a New Testament example, the Apostle Paul writes letters both from prison where his movements are restricted (e.g. Philippians) or while on the move to address a Christian community he is unable to visit at that moment (e.g. Romans). The borders favouring the mobility of written texts over authoritative storytellers may also be more than physical, just as migrants who cross languages and cultures quickly sense the need for new, vernacular expressions of old traditions.

Evidence for this sort of cross-cultural movement can be seen in the physical migration of the Jews to exile going together with a shift in their language from Hebrew to Aramaic, the language of Babylon. Even after some Jews returned from exile, Nehemiah records a fascinating scene in Jerusalem when Ezra's public reading of the Old Testament law is accompanied by Levites who offered simultaneous translation and explanation in Aramaic for those who apparently could not understand the original Hebrew (Nehemiah 8.1–8).<sup>21</sup> This change to Aramaic as the heart language of the people also extends to the production of biblical texts, for several post-exilic books contain Aramaic sections which use

this lingua franca to confront the world with the sovereignty of Israel's God (e.g. Daniel 2.4b–7.28). Similarly, the later move from Aramaic to Greek in the fourth century BC results not only in the translation of the Old Testament into Greek (known as the Septuagint), but also paves the way for the New Testament's eventual spread from Palestine to the broader Hellenistic world, quite literally on the backs of Greek-speaking Christians during the first century AD.

## Orality, Textuality, and Literacy

The close relationship between orality and textuality in the Bible leads necessarily to questions about the extent of literacy in the biblical world – who would possess the skills to harness the synergy between God's spoken and written words? Following McLuhan's lead, advocates of orality methods tend to assert that literacy was uncommon in ancient times.<sup>22</sup> This leads to the implication, sometimes unstated, that the task of reading and writing texts is reserved for a gifted, educated elite (whether then or now).

As a matter of method, it is imperative to understand the manner in which the Bible characterises itself as a text to be read. Modern people usually associate reading with the silent act of opening a printed book, but the task of reading in biblical times always involved the audible recitation of a written text.<sup>23</sup> This cultural given can especially be seen in the verbs that denote reading in Hebrew and Greek. The operative verbs are Hebrew *qārā'* and its Greek counterpart *anaginōskō*, both of which primarily mean 'to call out' or 'to cry out'. It would be anachronistic to understand the Old Testament reference to 'reading' the law on the part of Israel's king (Deuteronomy 17.19) or the New Testament reference to the Ethiopian eunuch 'reading' the scroll of Isaiah (Acts 8.28) as anything other than an oral recitation. The modern practice of silent reading was quite rare until the Middle Ages, more than a millennium after the New Testament period.<sup>24</sup> Reading texts was therefore of less value than hearing them, and the Bible consistently reflects such a cultural milieu by being written more for the ear than the eye.

This is not to minimise the enormous contributions of Bible translators in modern times who work closely with literacy specialists to create written languages and Bibles for pre-literate peoples. It appears, however, that the concept of 'literacy' in the cultural environment of the Bible is not primarily the ability to read and write a given language. This insight is not as foreign as it might seem to modern people, just as the English idiom 'biblical literacy' relates more to how well the Bible has been learned by heart and expressed in life than the basic cognitive skills required to read in the first place. And given how the communally oriented world of the Bible (not to mention much of the Majority World today) typically expected these texts to be recited in a public forum, one

might add that 'biblical literacy' in the truest sense entails how well the community of faith as a whole displays living proof of internalising the Bible, rather than how well an individual can decode the words of the Bible in isolation from others.

That being said, the modern concept of literacy can remain a useful bridge between oral and textual modes of communication. It is no accident that the major developmental periods for the Bible's individual books occurred at moments when the ability to read increased significantly among the general populace or when a new lingua franca was adopted. For example, the dawn of biblical literature in the age of the patriarchs and Moses during the second millennium BC coincided with the revolutionary change from the extremely complex writing systems of Babylonian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs to the much simpler alphabetic script of Hebrew and other Semitic languages. Cuneiform and hieroglyphs both required the memorisation of hundreds of signs, restricting mastery of languages using these systems to a select group of royally educated scribes. By contrast, the Hebrew alphabet only has 22 letters and can be learned rather quickly, a technological breakthrough which facilitated the production of the Hebrew Bible and the corresponding rise of a class of common people in Israel as its readers.<sup>25</sup> As noted in the previous section, much the same can be said about the arrival of Aramaic and Greek in biblical history, for it was at such times that the other nations of the world were surprised to hear the God of Israel addressing them directly in their own languages (e.g. Jeremiah 10.11 [in Aramaic], and Acts 2.4 [in all the languages of the Jewish diaspora]).

## Conclusion

The Bible does not force us to choose between orality and textuality. Instead, the Old and New Testaments address the whole person and community of faith – both head and heart – through a combination of oral and textual methods. The Bible's holistic strategy for communication overcomes the modern dichotomy between textuality and orality which stems from an inadequate grasp of how they always relate to each other in dynamic ways. In summary, spiritual transformation is not the unique contribution of orality methods; nor does the textuality of the Bible necessarily provide a superior medium for God's objective truth to which oral learners will typically lack access.<sup>26</sup> Taking their cues from how the Bible interposes itself across textuality and orality, wise theologians and missionaries will instead perceive both dimensions of God's living truth, since fixating on one medium to the exclusion of the other can only result in the need to 'rescue' the Bible from limitations of the interpreter's own making.

*World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), pp.17–29, 77–86.

19. DL Bock, 'The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?', in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (ed. MJ Wilkins & JP Moreland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 73–99.

20. Dunn, 'Altering'; R Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); KE Bailey, 'Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels', *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991), pp. 34–54.

21. Schniedewind, *Bible*, pp. 179–80.

22. E.g., Koehler, *Telling*, p. 28.

23. D Boyarin, 'Placing Reading: Ancient Israel and Medieval Europe', in *The Ethnography of Reading* (ed. J Boyarin; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 12–16.

24. For a complete history of silent reading, see P Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

25. JA Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 119–24.

26. As CD Strong points out ('Contextualization, Biblical Inerrancy, and the Orality Movement', *Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics* 7 [2014, pp. 276–77]), the assumption that oral learners are less capable of exercising biblical discernment runs throughout a blog post on missions and orality by John Piper ('Missions, Orality, and the Bible: Thoughts on Pre-, Less-, and Post-Literate Cultures', 16 November 2005, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/missions-orality-and-the-bible> [accessed 7 December 2015]).