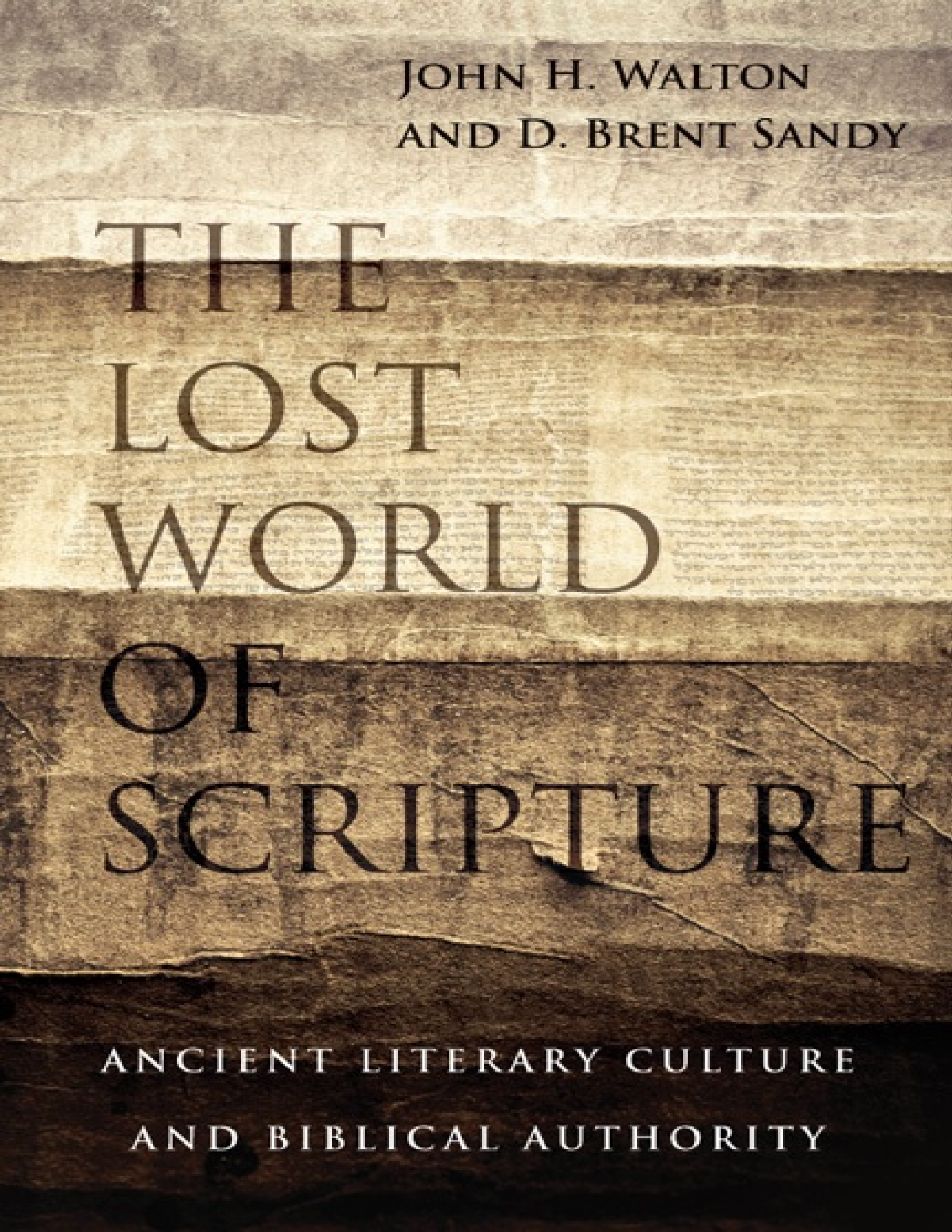

JOHN H. WALTON
AND D. BRENT SANDY
THE LOST WORLD OF SCRIPTURE
ANCIENT LITERARY CULTURE
AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

The Lost World of Scripture

Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority

John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy



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Preface

This book is about a lost world. But it's not about a search for lost books, or lost chalices, or the lost Atlantis of Plato. This is a search for a lost culture that had a significant effect on how the Bible was written.

Remarkably, even after thousands of years of people reading and studying the Bible, there is still more to learn and understand. That says a lot about the nature of the Bible and its divine author. But another reason calls for continuing study of Scripture. Like archaeologists finding ossuaries in ancient Jewish tombs, or mudlarkers digging up ancient Roman coins in the tidal mud of the Thames River, or scuba divers uncovering a sunken Greek ship in the Mediterranean Sea, scholars are constantly exploring more and more of the ancient world and finding increasingly interesting insights. And all of that has potential for offering clearer understanding of the inspired and authoritative Word of God.

In this book we are exploring ways God chose to reveal his Word in light of discoveries about ancient literary culture. Our specific objective is to understand better how both the Old and New Testaments were spoken, written and passed on, especially with an eye to possible implications for the Bible's inspiration and authority. That is a lot to deal with in one book, so we will not be able to probe the depths as much as we would like. Some readers may wish for more; others may feel it's more than enough as it is.

A major stimulus in our work is students who stay after class and ask *the* question in hushed tones—first looking around to make sure everyone else has left the room—Why do we still use the word *inerrancy*? It's an inevitable question, which the evidence raises on its own. So part of the purpose of this book is to bring students back from the brink of turning away from the authority of Scripture in reaction to the misappropriation of the term *inerrancy*.

This book has been a team effort. John and his wife, Kim, hosting Brent in their home offered opportunities for dialogue. Both of us teaching graduate students who ponder inerrancy prompted exchange of ideas as we sought to offer helpful responses. Working at an institution and with a faculty that take a strong stand on inerrancy but that are open to dialogue provided a safe context in which to explore the authority of Scripture from the ground up.

The chapters in this book on the Old Testament were written by John, those on the New Testament by Brent. We are in basic agreement about the content of

our respective chapters, and in cases where we might have expressed things differently, the points are so minor we do not consider them worth elaborating.

In similar fashion to John's book *The Lost World of Genesis One*, we have laid out our chapters in propositions. We hope the succinct statements of what each chapter seeks to accomplish will aid readers in following the logic of the progression of topics we discuss.

As we wrote we sought to keep general readers in mind in hopes that our book would be helpful to the church at large. We trust that Christian students in colleges, seminaries and universities will especially find our book useful. At the same time, we wrote for colleagues who have a high view of Scripture, especially those who hold to inerrancy. A subject so complex needs to be a team effort. We will not be surprised if many of our proposals will be unexpected by some and passé to others.

This book is not intended for outsiders; that is, it's not an apologetic defense of biblical authority. Rather, we're writing for insiders, seeking to clarify how best to understand the Bible, and in addition, hoping to help insiders be better prepared to interact with outsiders.

We would like to thank colleagues who gave sacrificially of their time to follow our lines of research and the direction of our thinking. They have saved us from many foibles and faux pas. John thanks in particular Dan Treier and Jonathan Walton. Brent thanks in particular Gary Meadors and Glen Thompson. Both thank John Hilber. Please note, however, that these gentlemen and scholars only get credit for things we said that are correct. Places where we are wrong are completely our own fault.

Resurrection Sunday, 2013

Introduction

Megatrends roll across the landscape of modern Western culture like massive storms. Off in the distance they may not look very interesting or significant, and without a keen observer alerting us to the potential effects storms can sneak up on us before we realize what's happening. In the wake of such storms, however, change can be historic.

The current digital revolution appears to be one of those megastorms. It's been over five hundred years since Western culture has had a revolution in print technology. But the changes swirling around us now appear to be as significant as the Gutenberg Galaxy was then, marking the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance.

The digital universe is a brave, new world, and we have not begun to see the end of it. There are many questions: How is our dependence on this new technology going to rewire our brains? Will people in the future look back on print culture and wonder about the lost world of Gutenberg? How will history judge what seems to us—while in the middle of it—to be a significant megatrend? Will we find ourselves yet another age removed from the ancient world of oral communication? Or might the digital revolution take us back to the future?

Understanding the oral and manuscript galaxy of the biblical world—before the watershed of print culture—is essential for grasping how the Bible was written. Before there were books and handwritten copies, there were only oral texts. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, before anyone wrote it down, was an oral text. Texts came into existence and were passed along differently in a world dominated by hearing. Brains were wired differently.

Before moving ahead into the chapters of this book, in this introduction we are beginning at ground zero. Fundamentally, we believe that the Bible deserves the highest possible honor as the richest, deepest, most powerful book ever written—there are simply no contenders. It is a literary masterpiece, a magnum opus, a stellar performance. But there's more to the story. The ultimate importance of the Bible lies elsewhere: it is the inspired revelation of Almighty God, a heavenly treasure in a world of impoverished ideas, a sparkling mountain stream in the driest of deserts. Our point, however, is not to worship the Bible; we worship the God of the Bible.

The incomparability of the Bible as divine revelation is easily overwhelmed

by its familiarity. Many Christians have multiple copies of the Bible in multiple versions. Some have access to it by the latest digital devices. Maybe they have attended church for years and have listened to its words over and over. We wonder if some of it goes in one ear and out the other. It must be heartbreaking for God when his Word loses its luster upon us, when its power is diminished by us, when we no longer long to hear the Spirit speaking to us.

Christians may forget or not take seriously that the Bible is the one and only, absolutely authoritative book, that it demands our utmost attention. Living out its truths is the highest of callings. If we fail to show the Bible the respect it is due, we are to be shamed. And it's more than theory; it's the practice of bringing our thoughts and lives into line with God's thoughts and life.

We hold a very high view of Scripture. We confess that the Bible is God's self-disclosure. The Old and New Testaments are the literary deposit of divine truth. The ultimate revelation is Jesus himself. The central message is creation, fall, redemption and restoration. We affirm inerrancy. We are in agreement with the definition suggested by David Dockery that the "Bible properly interpreted in light of [the] culture and communication developed by the time of its composition will be shown to be completely true (and therefore not false) in all that it affirms, to the degree of precision intended by the author, in all matters relating to God and his creation."[1]

The portion of Dockery's statement about the "culture and communication developed by the time of its composition" is specifically where this book seeks to make its primary contribution.[2] How did communication function in ancient Near Eastern and Greek and Roman worlds? How did God, speaking long ago in various ways (Heb 1:1), become men speaking from God (2 Pet 1:21), which in turn became "it is written" (Mt 4:4-10)? God spoke, people spoke on his behalf, and people wrote; what could be simpler? Well, as we will unfold in the chapters below, there is much to consider about the whole process.

Most of us are probably unprepared, however, for how different the ancient world is from our own. As should be obvious—though to many it's apparently not—the Old Testament is more similar to the culture of the ancient Near East, and the New Testament to the culture of the Greeks and Romans, than either is to our twenty-first-century world. We're thousands of years and thousands of miles removed. It means we frequently need to put the brakes on and ask whether we're reading the Bible in light of the original culture or in light of contemporary culture. While the Bible's values were very different from ancient cultures', it obviously communicated in the existing languages and within

cultural customs of its day.

In addition to the challenges of comprehending ancient literary culture, there's a considerable "lostness" in how the Bible came into being. Much of what was eventually written was first revealed in oral forms. For example, we find God speaking to Jeremiah for twenty-three years, and after all those years and sermons only then telling him to write what he had been preaching. Or Jesus preaching and living out the truth for three years with no hint of writing down his teaching or even suggesting that his followers should preserve anything in writing. Or the book of Acts recording the first thirty years of the history of the early church with no reference to written forms of the gospel. Our explorations will lead to important insights about this "lostness."

Among other things, the evidence assembled in this book inevitably leads to the question of inerrancy. While we wholeheartedly affirm what the Bible itself reveals about its origin, authority and truthfulness, we recognize that there is always a bit of uneasiness when discussing inerrancy and related concepts in fresh ways. This is sacred turf. But the truth of the matter is, no term, or even combination of terms, can completely represent the fullness of Scripture's authority. In that regard, we find it helpful to remember John Calvin's comment that his commitment to both divine and human aspects of Scripture exposed him to accusations that he did not believe in verbal inspiration.[3] In other words, it's nearly impossible to speak accurately about the inspiration of Scripture and not contradict oneself or be misunderstood. Nonetheless, we will do our best, even if it puts us at risk of being misunderstood.

It's fitting to conclude this introduction by affirming the summary of the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy:

> 1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.
>
> 2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: It is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.
>
> 3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us

by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.

4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.

5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.[4]

Part 1

The Old Testament World of Composition and Communication

Proposition 1

Ancient Near Eastern Societies Were Hearing Dominant and Had Nothing Comparable to Authors and Books as We Know Them

Why is it that I can hear playing in a restaurant a song that I haven't heard for thirty years and can still sing along with each word? It is likely that I have never seen the written-out words to those songs, but I often remember them meticulously. This is simply one illustration of the role hearing can play in passing on traditions.

Our modern Western society operates on the premise of literacy. It is not just that we value reading and writing enough to try to teach these skills to every child throughout their education; reading and writing are essential to even a basic level of participation in society. It is the rare person who cannot read and write. Western culture can therefore be described as a text-dominant culture. Nevertheless, many learn better by hearing than by reading. Text may have its advantages, but hearing should not be considered an inferior transmission mode. This is an important distinction because the value that our society has placed on literacy sometimes leads to the misperception that literacy and intelligence or sophistication go hand-in-hand. Sophisticated and productive participation in a society based on texts requires literacy, but not so in a hearing-dominant society.

Computers provide a helpful illustration. A high percentage of computer users are not competent to read computer software code, let alone write it. In that area we are illiterate, yet we can use a computer in intelligent and even sophisticated ways because our use of the computer does not require us to be programmers. In a similar fashion, a society that is hearing dominant has developed in such a way that participation does not require reading or writing, except by a small group of specially trained individuals who can serve the basic needs of society.

If we are to understand more fully the development of biblical literature and our view of its authority, we need to adjust our thinking about how information was disseminated and traditions transmitted in the ancient world. In the ancient world, it was the scribes who represented the specialist minority. Other members

of a society might have been capable of learning to read and write, and in some periods and places undoubtedly did so at a very basic level,[1] but there was no need for common people or even elites to become literate (just as there is no need for us to learn programming language) to function. Literacy involved an esoteric and arcane skill set, and its advantages were not significant enough to warrant the time to achieve it. Literacy is not necessarily absent in hearing-dominant societies; it is simply nonessential. It would therefore be inaccurate to think that hearing-dominant cultures are necessarily illiterate. This designation itself has become pejorative in our usage; we should better use “non-literate.” The operative contrast is not “orality versus literacy” but “hearing-dominant versus text-dominant.” William Schniedewind has pointed out that the latter is simply a difference in how people are equipped to process information.[2]

As an illustration consider the specialty of car mechanics. Many people understand automotive basics and could do basic tasks. Changing the oil is not rocket science, yet even those who can easily do so have it done for them because they don’t want to crawl under the car or bother with the mess or equipment. Others know more about cars and might do tune-ups on their own, but they cannot begin to cope with built-in computers and the problems they identify. Even some professional mechanics have to send customers to specialized dealers.

We can transfer this same sort of spectrum to writing and the scribal profession in the ancient world. Basic literacy was not out of the range of the common person, but various levels of professionals were used either for expedience or in situations when the required expertise exceeded basic skills.

The World of Hearing Dominance

The ancient world was consistently hearing dominant rather than text dominant. Information was disseminated orally. Traditions were passed on by word of mouth generation to generation. The ability to read or write was not essential to be a fully functioning member of society, and literacy was not part of the basic education process, formal or informal, so no one was disadvantaged if they could not read or write. Hearing is often a corporate exercise and therefore coincides with the significance of community in the ancient world. Reading and writing are more often individualistic exercises and coincide with the value of individual independence in modern Western society. People gather to hear; they go off on

their own to read or write.

In a hearing-dominant society not only is information disseminated orally, but also authority operates differently than in a text-dominant society. Schniedewind appropriately observes, “Writing locates authority in a text and its reader instead of in a tradition and its community.”[3] From our modern, text-dominant context, we often think of oral traditions as being unreliable because of their fluidity. In fact, however, written traditions can be just as fluid as oral ones. The fluidity depends on the demands of the context in which the tradition is being transmitted. As a modern illustration of the staying power of hearing, people in churches today who were raised on hymns recognize immediately when even a single word has been changed, whether for updating language or gender-inclusive inclinations. As I am writing this I am on the road speaking in various places, and therefore encountering a variety of worship experiences. In a chapel service yesterday we sang a hymn that I probably had not sung or heard in decades. In the fourth verse a line was changed and it immediately caught my attention. Our ears can be very demanding about the precise transmission of treasured traditions, and that would have been even more the case in a society in which oral transmission of tradition was the norm.

Many in text-dominant settings might sincerely believe that text transmission is more reliable and clearly superior. Why would any society capable of literacy settle for anything else? In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates weighs in on the issue: “You might think that [written words] spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it.”[4]

Furthermore, writing was perceived as having certain highly specific roles and qualities in the ancient world. An ideology of writing developed in the ancient Near East that saw writing as an appropriate means for communicating with deities. Magical incantations and rituals therefore took written form, though they were also performed orally. Schniedewind points out that the god Thoth in Egypt is both the god of scribes and the god of magic.[5] Likewise, writing was employed as a means for the state to encode power and authority within society. “Public written monuments were not for reading, but were displays of royal power and authority.”[6] Authority was therefore less vested in the written document than in the authoritative figure whose power was displayed in the monument. We will develop the significance of this in the next chapter.

For the current discussion it is important to acknowledge Schniedewind’s

insightful conclusion: “Oral tradition and written texts also represent competing centers of authority. While orality and *literacy* may exist on a continuum, orality and *textuality* compete with each other as different modes of authority.”[7] A good example would be a church that holds a formal written doctrinal statement, but has an additional oral tradition identifying which elements of the statement they take seriously and which they do not, as well as oral tradition about interpretations of the lines in the statement. Perhaps the oral tradition even includes additional beliefs. In this illustration the oral authority is competing with the textual authority. The nature of authority competition might also be understood in the context of discussions in modern higher education about the authority found in books versus the authority often granted by beginning students to open-source internet resources to which anyone without credentials might contribute. Another example would be how people pick up as authoritative what they hear on the History Channel rather than going to reliable history books written by qualified academics.

Why Then Documents?

In an ancient hearing-dominant society, texts are largely documents written for a much more limited number of reasons than in a text-dominant culture.

1. *Documents were written for archives.* At times there were family archives, but state or temple archives were more prevalent. Archives would house administrative documents, generally either of an economic or legal nature. Such documents were part of essential record keeping and would rarely be accessed. (Compare all of the miscellaneous documents you keep in your file cabinet.) Scribes for hire would serve the function of drawing up such documents, just as lawyers today draw up formal legal documents for notarization. Royal or temple archives might also hold the documents of state (e.g., decrees, treaties, royal correspondence).

2. *Documents were written for libraries.* Though these might sometimes overlap with archives or be housed together, we can refer to libraries as focused on creative literary works. Libraries may have had wider or more frequent access than archives, but we should not confuse them with the

function of libraries today. They were not public, and most people would have no reason to access them nor would they have the wherewithal to do so (being non-literate).[8] Common folks tended to rely on oral tradition rather than the documents that might preserve those traditions. Who would compile the libraries and why? One possibility is that such libraries reflect the wisdom enterprise of collecting. An alternative is that they represent an antiquarian interest in preservation of far-flung traditions. Some evidence even suggests that a great library like that of Ashurbanipal was compiled for apotropaic purposes. David Carr suggests that libraries were compiled for reference but would rarely be accessed.

The focus was on inscribing a culture's most precious traditions on the insides of people. Within this context, copies of texts served as the solidified reference points for recitation and memorization of the tradition, demonstrations of mastery of the tradition, and gifts from the gods. But they were not for the uninitiated. Few of the literate would have progressed to the point where they would have been able or motivated to use such texts to access traditions they did not already know.[9]

Dominique Charpin reports that of the thousands of tablets found in the most famous of ancient libraries (Ashurbanipal, seventh century B.C.), about a quarter of the texts relate to divination, another 20 percent pertain to rituals and prayers, and about the same percentage are lexical lists. The literary texts number about forty.[10]

Regardless of the uncertainty of our information, at this stage it is important simply to note that document writing in the ancient world would have served different purposes than it does today. Even today, book collectors might have a wide range of motivations fueling their hobby. Furthermore, the scribes who wrote these documents were not exercising their creative literary skills—creativity was manifested at the oral level. The scribes were the menial experts, not the literary creators or the authorities (more on this next chapter).

3. *Documents were often written as school texts*. In the scribal curriculum, certain literary texts were copied by fledgling scribes trying to perfect their skills. Such texts are frequently unearthed and manifest the kinds of mistakes in copying that scribes, especially inexperienced ones, might make. This proliferation of particular documents does not

reflect extensive circulation of them; they remained localized in the scribal school. While it may be true that the selection of these documents for the scribal curriculum reflects a desire to preserve important traditions, other motivations could also be possible.

4. *Documents were written to be read aloud*. When a decree was issued, a messenger would travel to the appropriate audience, be that king or commoner, to read it aloud. Even if the audience was capable of reading, it may have been considered more appropriate for the content to be heard (note Jer 36). There was no reading public, only public reading.

5. *Documents were written as symbolic expressions of power*. Many of the royal inscriptions were not expected to be read by the public, and sometimes were even buried in the ground or placed in inaccessible places. It was more important to see the document (even from afar) than it was to read it. More important than what it said was that it had been written. At times such documents indicate that the audience the king had in mind was either a future king or the gods.[11]

This very brief introduction to the contrast between hearing-dominant societies and text-dominant societies is significant for our understanding of ancient Israel and of how what has become our Bible took shape. When we first encounter Israel it is a hearing-dominant society, largely non-literate as most of the ancient world was (though served by a literary elite and characterized even early on by some capacity for literacy among the general population[12]). Over time through the Iron Age (monarchy period) Israelite society became increasingly literate, the role of texts expanded and literary production became more important. It remains quite controversial when that took place,[13] but for our purposes we need not decide that because the fact is that oral dominance continued through the Greco-Roman period and to a large extent up until the invention of the moveable-type printing press. For our purposes, it is enough to proceed with an investigation of what it would look like for the process of literary production to transpire in a hearing-dominant society. Evidence that ancient Israel was hearing dominant is found in the common wording of the text itself where we find frequent references to the words being spoken and to people hearing.[14] At the same time, we should not minimize or dismiss the statements in the Bible about written documents and the role that they played.[15]

If through most of the Old Testament period Israel was a hearing-dominant society, we would not expect complex literary production in the early stages of formation of biblical texts, though at the same time we must admit that there is no direct evidence of oral composition of biblical texts, that is, no statements that allude explicitly to such a process. Susan Niditch, however, identifies numerous indicators that the written texts we now possess had oral precursors. Oral styles embedded in written works include repetition within a passage, use of formulas and formula patterns, and conventionalized patterns of content.[16] These betray the document as a secondary medium.

As an illustration, I grew up playing table tennis with all of its strokes and techniques. When I took up tennis in my late teen years my first inclination was to use my table tennis techniques with the larger racket on the larger playing field. That I was inherently a table tennis player transplanted was evident to any tennis player. As another illustration, cooking pancake batter on a waffle iron still results in something that tastes like a pancake; similarly, preserving an oral tradition in a document will not obscure the characteristics of orality. Indicators suggest that we need to consider the likelihood that the earliest stages that led to the development of the canonical literary tradition began in a hearing-dominant society, characterized by oral dissemination and undergirded by documents that were preserved in archives or libraries. Nothing in the biblical text undermines this model, and everything we know from the ancient world supports it. This means that we have to think differently about “books” and “authors” in the ancient world, which leads us to the next section.

Authors and Books Versus Authorities, Scribes and Documents

Today when we think of the books of the Bible and their authors, our thoughts are constrained by cultural ideas. We live in a world with intellectual property rights connected to ideas that are copyrighted, published, marketed and distributed in a text-dominant society where people have personal libraries for which they purchase books that they read silently to themselves. None of these modern elements existed in the ancient world, yet we easily impose such a system on our understanding of the production of the books of the Bible. It would not be an overstatement to say that in the ancient world there were no authors and there were no books—at least not in anything like the form that we are familiar with today.[17] Instead there were authorities, documents and

scribes.[18]

Authorities and tradents. Authorities are the individuals and institutions that generate information. The foremost human authority was, of course, the king. His authority extended also to members of his administration who executed his authority. Other authority, often but not always independent, was found in the temple personnel. Local government also served in an authoritative role. All of these authorities generated the information by which society operated: correspondence, decrees, agreements at various levels, rulings and so on for the governmental authorities; rituals, incantations, prayers and so on for the temple personnel; and divination texts by the specialists in the administration working in that area. Royal authority was also responsible for generating the records of the administration: annals and chronicles of the king's activity, royal inscriptions and dedications of public works, especially temples. When dissemination of this information was necessary, it was typically done orally, though it was often preserved in written documents in archives. As a result, we would not say that authorities generated documents—that collapses too many steps into one. Authorities generated important information. Scribes generated documents in support of the administration for a variety of uses.

Beyond all of these administrative levels of information, largely anonymous individuals are also behind the production of what might be called literary works. We will refer to these people as *tradents*—those who were involved in the perpetuation of traditions. Everyone is a tradent at some level, but some members of society have a more significant role in this regard and it is to them we refer. Some of these tradents could be members of the scholarly elite, and their products would be found in wisdom sayings and in mythological and epic traditions. With very few exceptions, these scholarly tradents remain anonymous. Authorities known by name would typically be those whose authority was derived from the political offices they held. It was rare that a tradent's name (even if a priest) would be preserved.[19] But the role of tradent was not limited to those who had been educated to serve society in formal scholarly vocations. In contrast, a level of authority would be granted to those who are respected as transmitters of traditions at every level within the family, clan, village or city. Nevertheless, those passing on the traditions would be understood as being distinct from those usually nameless tradents in the hoary past who originated (or significantly shaped) traditions—in fact it is dubious that people would have thought of such traditions as having a singular point of origination.

Documents. In the ancient world books were not "published." Intellectual property was an unknown concept as were copyright and plagiarism. Neither sales and marketing nor commercial distribution of any kind took place. Literary production took the form of documents rather than books. In fact, the Hebrew word that is often translated "book" (*sēpher*) refers to a document, whatever material it might be written on. Documents might be recorded on wax tablets (temporary), ostraca, papyrus, parchment, clay tablets or stone—rarely even on bronze. They tended to be relatively brief and simple rather than complex. Even the products of scholarly authorities tended to be limited in length. (For example, only a few pieces required multiple tablets in Mesopotamia or multiple leaves of papyrus in Egypt; scrolls by their nature became unwieldy if they got very long.) These documents were designed for storage and consultation in archives, not for circulation as in a text-dominant society. This remained true even after the transition to text dominance began. The general population did not own documents, had little access to documents and would be largely incapable of reading documents.

Documents were considered important for scribes to have access to when situations arose that necessitated consultation. Though these documents would have been periodically recopied, they did not have a major role in the functions of society or in the transmission of the traditions they held. When tales were told or wisdom conveyed, the documents were not checked out of the library. Such information was resident in the oral traditions of the culture and was drawn from them. Authority was not connected to a document but to the person of authority behind the document when that person was known, or to the tradition itself.

We still do this today. Most of us have never read any papers by astronomers proving the number of the planets or their orbits around the sun. Most of us were told these facts by our third-grade teacher. Even if we did read it in a book, the book was simply repeating what the teacher said, not substantiating or defending it; most of us have never read a book about how to determine planetary orbits with a calculator and a telescope. We accept our astronomy on the authority of "science" that we have never read and would not understand if we did.[20] The science we believe to be true is the heritage we have from tradents who have passed this authoritative canon on to us through a myriad of cultural means. Even truths that are connected to authority figures often have been supplemented in that authority figure's name by later tradents. Our understanding of Darwinism includes much more than what Darwin himself promulgated. We even have a school of thought referred to as Neo-Darwinism to affirm some

growth in the tradition.

This concept of identifying authority figures whose thinking becomes canonized at one level, but remains subject to ongoing tradent involvement, is also well known in other fields. We recognize Platonism and Neo-Platonism, Epicureanism, and Freudian ideas. In biblical studies we are even aware that a scholarly figure such as Wellhausen, not himself the originator of his ideas but the one who popularized them, stands as an important tradent in the tradition of source theory. At the same time, Wellhausianism is its own school of thought that Wellhausen himself would hardly recognize today.

Scribes. Authorities were not generally engaged in writing (since writing was not the primary means of generating and transmitting information). Writing would generally have been done by scribes, even when the authority figure was literate and capable of doing it himself. Writing was associated primarily with preservation (archives and libraries) and only secondarily with dissemination (written copy so that others could read it aloud; see 2 Chron 17:9). The scribes who copied the traditions were not the ones who would recite the traditions in public—these were separate roles.

Scribes were trained to produce documents and maintain archives. The most visible manifestation of their vocation was in connection with the court (national or local) and the temple. Nevertheless, the general public would have required some access to scribal professionals for generating the documents of daily life (receipts, inventories, land production, legal depositions, marriage contracts, inheritance distribution, etc.). It is not unlikely that something as basic as a receipt or inventory could be written by those who had not had scribal training, but any formal documents would have been entrusted to the scribe. Scribes were not the intellectuals of society. Their specialized training did not accord them elite status among the intelligentsia. The scribe would not be confused with the authority whose words he recorded, nor would the authority be likely to undertake the task of the scribe.

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Proposition 2

Expansions and Revisions Were Possible as Documents Were Copied Generation After Generation and Eventually Compiled into Literary Works

So far we have proposed that the ancient world, including Israel, was hearing dominant and that the main transmission of information took place in the oral world, not the text world. Important traditions found their authority in the people who generated them and transmitted them orally, so the traditions and their authority also had their principal residence in the oral world. In this world there were no authors or books. The important information and traditions resident in the oral world were rendered into documents by scribes for a variety of reasons and were then consigned to archives or libraries, where they were accessible only to the scribes who maintained those repositories and the scholars who might consult the documents there. This model is derived from what is known throughout the ancient world and is supported by the evidence that exists in the Old Testament.

While oral transmission enjoys a modicum of fluidity in some regards, in others it is quite conservative. If a tradition is being transmitted (as opposed to a decree or a legal ruling) the speaker may have some latitude based on his or her audience, artistry and time. (Shorter speaking time might result in abridged content.) Consequently, while traditions have some stability in the broad strokes, there would be diversity from one teller to the next. These concepts can be affirmed anthropologically as well as anecdotally, but the specifics of how oral traditions worked in ancient Israel particularly are beyond our grasp.

Consider how a recipe for cookies is passed from generation to generation. Sometimes it may be followed slavishly, other times with creativity. Even though amounts of ingredients and even ingredients themselves may vary, the result is still the traditional cookie with the traditional name. If the recipe is changed too dramatically, then it is a different cookie. Furthermore, the recipe may exist in writing, but its familiarity could be such that the written recipe would rarely be consulted.

For our investigation, it is important for us to try to understand the transition

from an oral tradition to a written tradition. The first question is, Which version of an oral tradition found its way into a document? We could imagine that a well-known tradition would be preserved in a document multiple times in multiple cities in multiple versions. A story is told generation after generation in a town, and a scribe eventually records the local version of it. The same is done in other towns with other scribes documenting other versions. Since the document is not the original form of the tradition, the document carries no authority concerning the tradition. It has a secondary status and a secondary role. It is not used to read from because the tradition resides in the oral world.

The Need for New Copies

Time goes on; the tradition continues to be preserved orally while the document sits in an archive or library. Perhaps scribes-in-training might use it for exercise, but the role of the document is negligible. A generation or two goes by and the document has deteriorated, so the decision is made to make a new copy. What sort of latitude will the scribe have as a new copy is made? Scribes are trained in the ability to be precise—they pride themselves on it and boast about it in the ancient literature. As copyists they are not creative artists who craft new shape to what they are copying. But careful revision is always a possibility. Perhaps since the last document was made, innovations have been made in the oral recitation of the tradition—not that the story has changed, but perhaps new insight into its meaning or application for new generations has arisen. Perhaps emphasis now falls on a different part of the tradition. Numerous possibilities exist. It would be appropriate to bring the new document into line with the current form of the oral tradition. Communities would make such decisions, whether scribal or popular, sometimes perhaps formally, more often just following a stream of tradition.

Furthermore, language changes—perhaps more slowly in the ancient world, but change is documented in many of the Semitic languages related to Hebrew and in Hebrew itself. A competent scribe would certainly update the language in such cases. Again, we must remember that at this stage the scribe does not think of himself as tampering with a canonical, written text.[1] The idea that scribes making new copies of documents would revise the language is actually very helpful for us as we try to understand the transmission of the biblical text. Nearly all of the Old Testament, no matter how ancient the traditions may be or at what date they may have been written, is in the form of Hebrew that we know was

current in the Iron Age (the period of the monarchy). Now we can see that the form of the language in our current texts should not be viewed as reflecting the date of the traditions, of the original documents or of the words the authority figures had first used. The transmission of the documents allowed for updating of language.[2]

Another advantage of these observations is that they provide a means of dealing with what we know of the development of Hebrew as a language.[3] Though the details remain vexingly elusive and therefore controversial, most scholars agree, and evidence substantiates, that Hebrew originated sometime in the second millennium B.C. Some would place its roots as early as the beginning of alphabetic script around the sixteenth century, while others would put it as late as the twelfth or eleventh centuries. We don't have to solve this for our discussion here. We do need to recognize that even the development of the language itself (let alone the date of the Hebrew represented in our texts) is later than some of the traditions that are incorporated in the text. Abraham did not speak Hebrew. It is even questionable whether what Moses spoke could be properly called Hebrew or whether we should identify it as a Canaanite precursor. It would not have been the Hebrew that we find throughout the Hebrew Bible that we possess.

Whatever developments took place, they took place gradually. It is not as if there were a radical invention of a new language called Hebrew that leaders decided to impose on a population. From earlier alphabetic, northwest Semitic roots, Hebrew took its own unique shape and became distinguished from languages related to it. We can see the same phenomenon at work when we trace the development of English from Beowulf, Spenser and Chaucer through Shakespeare and the King James Bible to modern colloquial American English. The change is gradual, but today most of us can't read Chaucer in its original form.

While such understandings are helpful, at the same time we must consider a more careful nuancing of the popular conception that the documents of our Old Testament preserve word for word that which was originally written by someone like Moses. Moses' words were spoken, and even if recorded very soon after that would not have been in the language that is preserved in our Bibles.[4] We will return to this later in the book.

So far we have discussed the updating of language and of place names. What else might a scribe do as a document is being recopied? Will lines or even sections be added? Will content be revised? Will explicit additions be made

reflecting new historical situations and ideas? In outline, we might consider the possibility of changes at the following levels:

1. Updated language and place names

2. Brief explanatory glosses for a contemporary audience or for added perspective (e.g., Gen 12:6; Num 12:3)

3. Added sections (e.g., the account of the death of Moses in Deut 34)

4. Updated formulations (e.g., legal perspectives as reflected in variations perhaps observable, for example, in the goring ox legislation in Exodus 21:28-32. In verse 29 the owner is to be put to death. Some interpreters see verses 30-32 as a later softening of the punishment in which a ransom may be paid instead, though I am not confident that we can identify whatever motives might be behind such variations.)

5. Integrated revision to address a new audience in contemporarily relevant ways (we can see this sort of revision reflected in the way the books of Chronicles give a different perspective on events from that found in the books of Samuel and Kings—could it happen within a document as it is recopied?)

Since at least a minimal amount of scribal editorial work is recognized, we have only to speak of the amount of editorial work that would be allowed. One could say that it is possible in theory that certain phrases or whole sections of a biblical book may be the result of later scribal activity, without having the confidence to indicate that all of those additions can be identified. Whatever level of interaction with a text the scribes had, we should not view that activity as destructive, deceptive or subversive. It would have been activity that was approved by the community and considered not only legitimate but advantageous. They were not tampering with authority, because authority continued to reside in the authority figure who inaugurated the tradition and in the tradition that had been transmitted by the tradents in the community. If that tradition grew and adapted over time, that is not a betrayal of the previous forms, communities, tradents or the authority figure—it instead reflects respect. As an illustration from a later time, the Pharisees were those tradents who were recognized by the community as the authoritative interpreters of Mosaic law, or

Torah. The Pharisaic interpretations were granted the same level of authority as the Mosaic law—in fact the Mosaic law was only known through the Pharisaic filter. Similar observations can be made about the Mishnah once we move into the rabbinic literature. This does not mean that the Pharisees or the Mishnah were correct in their interpretation of Moses, only that their communities granted them that status.

Scribal Tasks

We have spoken of the scribe primarily as serving a menial task rather than playing a creative role. Now, however, we need to bring further nuance to the scribe's role. Karel van der Toorn identifies six activities that extend beyond the menial tasks: transcription of oral lore, invention of new texts, compilation, expansion, adaptation for a new audience and integration of documents into a larger composition.[5] Even in transcription, he contends, the scribe is not simply a stenographer but contributes his own style and language. We might compare a situation today in which you tell a lawyer what you want your will to stipulate, but then he or she is expected to couch that content in appropriate legal language. The ways that people (whether commoners or elites) worked with scribes might be understood by comparing how today the U.S. President works with his speech writers.

Consider also the task of a chef. At a training level, chefs follow recipes precisely. They take pride in their ability to do so and are trained to execute in that way. Their training, however, also includes instruction in the nature of ingredients and how they can be used and combined in order to accomplish tasks. Lower levels of chefs may never proceed beyond the precise execution of a recipe. Many may go to the next level and begin tweaking recipes to achieve particular results. Only very advanced chefs become involved in creating recipes, but even then their work is based on traditional knowledge. In this latter category are those we might identify as tradents. Even among tradents, however, there would be at times the need to reproduce a recipe exactly. We can think about scribes in the same kinds of categories.

Invention on the part of the scribe becomes more common as societies transition to being text dominant. Just as oral characteristics can be identified in documents that preserve traditions that originated in hearing-dominant contexts, so literary characteristics are evident in works that originated as text. Examples

of literary characteristics include the acrostic form (which is largely visual in nature) or a work that makes frequent literary allusions or even quotations. Such intertextuality implies a literary composition. Overall, invention was an evolving role for scribes, and probably only the privilege of the most accomplished among them. One of the primary genres of the ancient Near East that is the product of scribal invention and had its origins in documents is the genre of royal inscription (though this may also have some dependence on court annals or chronicles, which also have their origin as documents).

Both compilation and integration attribute to the scribe the role of editor. Here the scribe is creating a new document or literary work by combining the information from either literary or oral traditions. Such scribes are playing the role of tradent. The resulting documents may require little creativity (e.g., the famous lists of Sumerian, Assyrian and Babylonian archives, where creativity would be limited to organization) or may become creative literary works in their own right (the final form of the Gilgamesh Epic or the biblical books of Chronicles). In the latter category the scribe's creativity is manifested in identifying a theme or focus and then selecting the appropriate information from the existing documents and arranging it in such a way that the theme is drawn out. The resulting works can be studied to discover the rhetorical strategy that gives them coherence. In the Gilgamesh Epic, various tales of Gilgamesh that had originally been separate oral traditions and existed in distinct documents were brought together with the theme of his search for immortality. In Chronicles, the many documents listed throughout the book, including the biblical books of Samuel and Kings, were sifted for information that would substantiate the scribal editor's focus on the importance of the temple and the Levites and his theme of retribution theology. With this theme and these focuses in view, he crafted a new vision of the covenant people of Yahweh. This same sort of work would have been responsible for the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings as well. A middle ground is observable in the biblical book of Psalms, in which 150 separate documents have been stitched together with intentionality in selection and arrangement.

In the transmission of traditions, the evidence from the ancient Near East suggests that as long as the documents were not considered the authoritative form (i.e., authority remained located in the authority figure or the oral tradition), fluidity remained. The historical transition to a fixed written tradition with which scribes can no longer be creative becomes evident as we begin to find a commentary tradition (working outside the text) replacing intratextual

revision (possible when the text was still fluid).[6]

Did Scribes Expand on Texts?

The fourth category of scribal activity is the most difficult and controversial: expansion. Today scholars label this "innertextuality." Unlike "intertextuality," where interpreters attempt to identify allusions to or dependence on other sources, innertextuality (sometimes "intratextuality") involves changes within the text tradition itself. It could include a number of activities that we have already discussed, such as updating of language or explanatory glosses. These are not controversial, nor can it be doubted that they took place. A second, more controversial activity is supplementation: new laws, new wisdom sayings, new narratives, new oracles added to an existing compilation. The third, and most controversial, involves interpretation. In this the received document is edited with interpretive information. This activity could also involve van der Toorn's category of "adaptation for a new audience." It is important for us to explore whether innertextuality regularly took place, what forms it took and whether biblical books may have been composed over time through the use of these techniques.

Van der Toorn struggles with the conflicting evidence regarding what we can learn from ancient texts about the work of the scribe. On the one hand, many statements and evidences in ancient texts insist and demonstrate that scribes prided themselves on faithful reproduction of text. Professional pride prevented the scribe from adding anything to or removing anything from the text that he was copying. Notations of line counts and reproduction of breaks in the tablets all substantiate this rigorous discipline. On the other hand, it is equally clear that new editions were sometimes developed and expansion is attested.[7] Traditions grew; interpretations were integrated; collections expanded. All of these levels of scribal activity are attested in the ancient world, and examples can be identified in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 34 is an example of an added section. Psalms and Proverbs are examples of growing collections. Chronicles is an example of integration of documents and literary works into creative new forms. The common identification that a situation in the narrative remains "to this day" (e.g., Josh 10:27) shows later reflection. Maybe these phenomena are extremely limited; maybe not. The fact is, if they occur at all we need to account for these areas of scribal activity in our understanding of biblical authority. Once

we factor them into our model, it is inconsequential how frequently they occur, or whether we can identify the different strata or not.

The typical sequence that we find would then begin with the oral traditions, the common medium for a hearing-dominant culture (whether these were simply traditional accounts that were considered to have authority or derived more directly from a figure who was considered authoritative). Those oral traditions would be recorded in documents (whether soon after they were spoken or sometime later), which would be stored in archives or libraries. In the third stage, and on an ongoing basis, the documents would be periodically recopied by scribes, often updated and sometimes revised or supplemented. As society became more text focused, the documents (perhaps further augmented by oral traditions) would begin to be compiled into literary works. These literary works themselves took on the authority derived from the traditions and the figures whose words they incorporated. The literary works sometimes underwent further modification and combination until they achieved the form that became frozen as canon.[8]

Though documents were recopied over time, in many cases those documents would have remained insignificant, having little role in the ongoing transmission of authoritative traditions in the hearing-dominant society. As transition gradually took place to a text-dominant status, literary activity increased and resulting literary works began to be seen as representing the authoritative form of tradition (though the authority was still intrinsically represented in the authority figure and the tradition). Scribes with sufficient status (tradents) compiled the documents of the archives into literary works, which began to develop into something that might be called canonical literature—a text with authority.

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Proposition 3

Effective Communication Must Accommodate to the Culture and Nature of the Audience

We apply communication theory every time we try to explain a procedure to someone. We need to assess what they already know and determine what words will be meaningful to produce the desired understanding. We intuitively tune into genre distinctions every time we read a newspaper and move from current events, to editorials, to comics (sometimes themselves about current events or offering editorial comment), to advertisements and sale notices.

As important as composition and transmission are, we easily recognize our need to understand how texts communicate, not just how they came into existence. If we do not understand how communication is working, we run the risk of misinterpreting. Our beliefs about biblical authority are intrinsically related to our understanding the communication rightly so as to interpret it accurately. Applying these principles to specific issues regarding the Old Testament will come later in the book.

There can be no question that accommodation is essential in God's communicating with humans. Every act of communication requires accommodation that will tailor the communication to the needs and circumstances of the audience. Without this, effective communication could not take place. The specific discussion here then is not directly concerned with how the human communicator of biblical literature may have accommodated his audience. Instead, it begins with the question of how God accommodated a human audience and what the ramifications are in the text. What are the implications this communicative truth holds for our doctrine of Scripture? Kenton Sparks attempts to define accommodation in terms of both the finiteness and the fallenness of the audience:

> Accommodation is God's adoption in inscripturation of the human audience's finite and fallen perspective. Its underlying conceptual assumption is that in many cases God does not correct our mistaken human viewpoints but merely assumes them in order to communicate with us.[1]

What does he imply by including the descriptors “finite” and “fallen”? He describes accommodation not just in terms of human viewpoints and perspectives, but also in terms of human errors. This leads Sparks to align himself with the claims in traditional biblical criticism that a variety of events recorded in the Bible never happened and that people traditionally presumed to have actually existed in fact never did. At the same time he embraces the term *inerrancy* even as he qualifies it.

Since the rise of critical biblical scholarship and its claims that certain people and events in the Bible were less fact than fancy, evangelicals have articulated their doctrine of Scripture by asserting Scripture’s factuality. Dickering between “inerrancy” and “infallibility” as the preferred terminology, lengthy statements (such as International Council on Biblical Inerrancy’s) have tied the factuality of Scripture to what it *affirms.* The field of comparative studies has entered the discussion, offering information from the ancient world that contributes more insight to our understanding of what it is that is being affirmed. Comparison with ancient genres has led some to the conclusion that narratives in the Bible, especially early ones, are not asserting historical fact. Furthermore, some propose that even if the communicators may have thought they were asserting historical realities, God simply accommodated the genres of the day along with their human misunderstandings and errors to produce something that was true at a larger, more significant level. Such negative conclusions are extreme and unnecessary, but comparative studies can make important positive contributions as well. To begin to glean the benefits of genre study, we can use some of the tools provided by what is called speech-act theory.[2]

Speech-Act Theory

Speech-act theory has been around for several decades. It recognizes that communication is an action with particular intentions. It therefore addresses both philosophical hermeneutics and comparative studies by locating the meaning within the communicative act between the communicator and the implied audience.[3] We do not agree with many of the conclusions associated with speech-act theory,[4] but we find its foundational premise and terminology helpful and have therefore adopted its three basic categories. The communicator uses *locutions* (words, sentences, rhetorical structures, genres) to embody an *illocution* (the intention to do something with those locutions—bless, promise,

instruct, assert) with a *perlocution* that anticipates a certain sort of response from the audience (obedience, trust, belief). A common illustration is the words spoken in a wedding. When the bride and groom say "I do" they are using a very basic locution—words that could be used in any number of contexts with varieties of meaning. But in this context they are used for a specific illocution: a lifetime vow of faithfulness and commitment. The resulting perlocution is the implementation of that vow throughout life. One can see that it is the illocution that carries the weight of the communication (see figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1.

By applying the tenets of speech-act theory, evangelical interpreters are able to associate the authoritative communicative act (God's illocution) specifically with the illocution of the human communicator.[5] God's authority in Scripture is therefore accessible through the illocution of the human communicator—that is how God chose to do it. We are not free to take the communicator's locutions (whether considered divine or human) and use them to formulate our own fresh illocutions and associated meanings—authority is compromised at best or lost entirely when we do that. Likewise, if we misunderstand how a genre (part of the locution) works, we risk misunderstanding the biblical communicator's illocution. We will develop examples of this in the following chapters as we consider several different genres.

Divine Accommodation in Locutions

Accommodation on the part of the divine communicator resides primarily in the locution, in which genre and rhetorical devices are included. These involve the *form* of the communication. Yet our conviction is that even though God accommodates the communicator and his audience in the trappings and framework of *locution*, he will not accommodate an erroneous *illocution* on the part of the human communicator. We are therefore distancing ourselves from Sparks with regard to the extent and nature of accommodation. God may well accommodate the human communicator's view that the earth is the center of the

cosmos. But if God's intention is not to communicate truth about cosmic geography, that accommodation is simply part of the shape of the locution—it is incidental, not part of God's illocution. In contrast, God will not accommodate a communicator's belief that there was an exodus from Egypt and speak of it as a reality if it never happened. God will accommodate limited understanding for the sake of communication—that is simply part of accommodation in the locution. But we would maintain that he will not communicate about how he worked in events (e.g., the exodus) or through people (e.g., Abraham) if those events never took place and those people never existed. Such accommodation would falsify his illocution and invalidate its reliability. Authority is linked to the illocution. Consequently there is a higher incidence of accommodation in the locutions; indeed that is entirely normal and expected. Authority is not vested independently in the locutions, and communication could not take place without such accommodation. In contrast, that which comes with authority (illocution) may involve accommodation to language and culture, but will not affirm that which is patently false.

When we talk about accommodation in biblical hermeneutics, we are talking about what God does, though human communicators are also involved in accommodation when they communicate on the basis of that which is familiar. In one sense, every successful act of communication is accomplished by various degrees of accommodation on the part of the communicator for the sake of the audience. Accommodation must bridge the gap if communicator and audience do not share the same language, the same command of language, the same culture or the same experiences.

We can distinguish "high context" communication as pertaining to situations in which the communicator and audience share much in common and less accommodation is necessary for effective communication to take place; this is communication between insiders. This is illustrated in the traffic reports that we hear constantly in Chicago, where the references to times of travel and locations of problems assume that the listener has intimate understanding of the highways. As a regular commuter, I find very meaningful the traffic reports that offer times of travel from various identified points and stretches where one might encounter congestion. When the reports say that it is a thirty-eight-minute trip from "the cave" to "the junction" and that it is congested from "the slip to the Nagle curve," I know exactly what to expect. When out-of-town guests visit, however, this information only confuses them. They don't know what the slip or the cave are (nor could they find them on a map), they don't know how far these places

are from one another, and they don't know that on a good day one can go from the cave to the junction in about eight minutes.

In the contrasting "low context" communication, high levels of accommodation are necessary because one is communicating to outsiders. A low context traffic report would have to explain to out-of-town listeners or inexperienced commuters just where the different locations were and what normal times would look like from one location to another. These would be much longer reports. If the traffic reporter made the report understandable to the out-of-town visitor, it would be too tiring to be of any use to the regular commuter it seeks to serve.

We propose that God accommodated the communicator and immediate audience as he employed the communicator in high context communication to his audience. So, for example, a prophet and his audience share a history, a culture, a language and the experiences of their contemporary lives. We enter the context of that communication as low context readers, outsiders who need to use all of our inferential tools to discern the nature of the communicator's illocution and meaning. We have to use research to fill in all that would not have to be said among insiders in the high context communication.

We believe that God has inspired the locutions (words, whether spoken or written) that the communicator has used to accomplish with God their joint illocutions (which lead to an understanding of intentions, claims, affirmations and, ultimately, meaning), but that those locutions are tied to the communicator's world. That is, God has made accommodation to the high context communication between the implied communicator and implied audience so as to optimize and facilitate the transmission of meaning by means of an authoritative illocution. Inspiration is tied to locutions (they have their source in God); illocutions define the necessary path to meaning, which is characterized by authority and inerrancy.

At times our distance from the ancient communicator might mean that we misunderstand the nature of his illocution because aspects of the locution are foreign to us. Comparative studies help us to understand more fully the nature of communicators' employed genres and rhetorical devices so that we do not mistake them for something that they never were. Such an exercise does not compromise the authority of Scripture, but ascribes authority to that which the communicator was actually communicating. If we misunderstand elements of the locution, it is likely that we will not succeed in identifying the illocution and understanding the meaning.

Inerrancy and Authority in Illocution

As noted, genre is largely part of the locution, not the illocution. Like grammar, syntax and lexemes, genre is a mechanism to convey an illocution. Accommodation takes place primarily at the locutionary level. Inerrancy and authority are related to the illocution; accommodation and genre attach to the locution. Therefore inerrancy and authority cannot be undermined, compromised or jeopardized by genre or accommodation. While genre labels may be misleading, genre itself cannot be true or false, errant or inerrant, authoritative or nonauthoritative. Certain genres lend themselves more to factual detail and others more toward fictional imagination. The nature of each genre must not be determined by any modern labels but must be based on an analysis of the characteristics of the literature itself. Illocutions will be limited to the sort that can be made by means of the genre that the communicator chooses to employ. If a genre is not focused on the activities of the gods, one would not expect an illocution to convey the activities of the gods. If a genre is not focused on recording factual detail, the illocution would not be evaluated in terms of factual detail.

Discerning the levels of a speech act is only the first stage in the task of interpretation. It is one thing to identify the illocution as a blessing; we then have to understand what the blessing entails. In this ongoing process, comparative studies continue to play a role. Culture-specific elements may be present in any of the three parts of the speech act. Culture-specific aspects of a locution do not determine the illocution. That is, even though people in Israel believed there were waters above the earth held back by a solid sky, or that cognitive processes took place in the heart or kidneys, the illocution of the texts is not affirming those beliefs as revealed truth. Culture-specific aspects of an illocution do not have a universal perlocution (eating pork, circumcision, head covering). Culture-specific aspects of the perlocution need to be translated to an appropriate contemporary perlocution. So our response to the second or third commandment will be adjusted to our culture and will differ in specifics from the response expected in the ancient context. Culture-specific aspects of a text, as illustrated in the examples mentioned above, typically concern worldview and behavior, not whether a person existed or whether an event occurred. If the communicator believed that a person existed or that an event took place, it would be difficult to claim that this was a culture-specific belief that was only part of the framework of his communication in his locution with no effect on the illocution. This is an important distinction. We would likewise not easily be able to say that the

communicator's illocution asserting the reality of a person or event was a culture-specific illocution that did not apply to us.

Comparative studies applied in the context of speech-act theory can help us to understand the cultural aspects of locution so that we might better discern the illocution of the communicator. Some attach inerrancy and authority to the locution and therefore have trouble seeing the cultural aspects of the text. Generally, however, subjective inconsistency is the result of this approach. Those who rule out comparative studies and their impact on our understanding of locutions don't believe that the sun moves across the sky (geocentric cosmos) or that we think with our hearts. But they do at times insist that there are "waters above." Others drift in the opposite direction and attach authority only to the perlocution. As long as we love and trust God, live obedient lives, love one another and so on we are recognizing the Bible's authority.

We propose instead that our doctrinal affirmations about Scripture (authority, inerrancy, infallibility, etc.) attach to the illocution of the human communicator. This is not to say that we therefore believe everything he believed (he *did* believe that the sun moved across the sky), but we express our commitment to his communicative act. Since his locutionary framework is grounded in his language and culture, it is important to differentiate between what the communicator can be inferred to believe and his illocutionary focus.[6] So, for example, it is no surprise that ancient Israel believed in a solid sky, and God accommodated his locution to that model in his communication to them. But since the illocution is not to assert the true shape of cosmic geography, we can safely set those details aside as incidental without jeopardizing authority or inerrancy. Such cosmic geography is in the belief set of the communicators but is employed in their locutions; it is not the content of their illocutions. Beliefs may be discernible specifically in the locution or generally in the communicator's context. Often we may judge them as irrelevant or immaterial to the illocution, and therefore unrelated to the authority of the text. Again, the idea that one thinks with one's entrails (e.g., Deut 11:18) is built into the locutions and beliefs of the biblical communicators, but the illocution is not to make assertions about physiology or anatomy. In these cases we would contend that cosmic geography and anatomy/physiology are part of the locutionary framework of the communication. To set aside such culturally bound locutions does not jeopardize the illocution or the authority. Genre is also part of the locution and is therefore culturally bound. We have to account for the cultural aspects and shape of the genre before we can properly understand the communicator's illocution.[7] At the

other end of the spectrum, having once understood the illocution, we cannot bypass it to adopt only a generalized perlocution (e.g., “love God and your neighbor and you will do fine”) that dismisses as accommodation and potentially erroneous the communicator’s genre-encased illocution.

We are committed to the illocution; a critical reading of the Old Testament is best directed to the locution. For example, if we are asking whether the entire globe was covered with water in the flood, we are dealing with how we should read the locutionary details (meaning of “all,” of “earth,” etc.—what are the truths the communicator intends to affirm through the genre and language he has chosen?). If we are asking whether there was a flood, we have moved to illocutionary focus. When we ask whether God parted the Red Sea, whether the man Abraham really existed or whether David slew Goliath, we have moved into the illocutions of the communicator as they relate to what has been called historiography (discussed at length in proposition 14).

In conclusion then, God accommodates human culture and limitations in the locutions that he inspires in the human communicator, but he does not accommodate erroneous illocution or meaning. The authority of Scripture is vested in the meaning intended by the human communicator and given to him by the Holy Spirit, which is guided by an understanding of his illocutions. These human illocutions have authority because they are the means by which God gives his illocutions. We need not be concerned that culturally limited locutions will diminish the Bible’s authority, but we dare not dismiss the illocutions and focused meaning as accommodating error. If meaning that carries authority is derived from the human communicator’s illocution, we dare not supply our own substitute illocutions and meanings derived from the human communicator’s locutions. Likewise, we will not be bothered by critical scholars who present their evidences of error or untrustworthiness in specific passages when we recognize that they are targeting aspects related to locutions (e.g., genre conventions), not to the meaning that can be derived through the illocutions.

Given the above discussion, the issue of accommodation plays a less significant role than it has been assigned in recent scholarship. Accommodation is a reality of communication. The relevant hermeneutic is based on our close attention to speech-act theory and the ways that comparative studies can help us to arrive at a clearer understanding of the locutions of ancient texts, including the Bible. Some have attempted to employ comparative studies as an influential factor in evaluating the truth claims of the text in ways that exceed their actual import, and this has led others to mistrust comparative studies rather than

critiquing how they are being employed. The authority and inerrancy of Scripture are not threatened by God's use of accommodation or by the employment of comparative studies. We can be guided in incorporating these ideas into our interpretation and theology by applying the categories of speech-act theory.

Proposition 4

The Bible Contains No New Revelation About the Workings and Understanding of the Material World

We consider the moon to be a piece of rock rotating in its orbit around the earth at just over one kilometer per second and reflecting the light of the sun from, on average, some 375,000 miles from earth. In the ancient world people knew none of this. They did not, however, have their own substitute material picture of the moon. The moon was a god (in the rest of the ancient Near East) or a light (the description in Genesis 1) and was not understood to be an object. In God's revelation to Israel, he did not give them a more advanced understanding of the moon in accordance with its material nature. Instead he communicated in terms of what they knew. We have discussed this accommodation and the need for it. But are there any places where rather than accommodating to their understanding, God incorporated more advanced science into the communication?

Now that we have identified genre as belonging to the category of locution, we can begin to examine some specific genres and genre issues to work out the implications. Furthermore, we will continue to attend to the ways that accommodation pertains to genres; after all, conforming to particular genre standards is a form of accommodation. This chapter begins the discussion with a focus on science—the area where there is arguably the most accommodation. In one sense this is the easiest area to deal with because some of the fundamental issues are agreed on by all. At the same time it touches on some of the great culture wars of our time, perhaps because we have not thought through the implications of the basic statements on which we agree.

Not a Science Textbook

To begin with, virtually no one objects to the observation that the Bible is not a science textbook. This means that the Bible's objective is not to give us a *scientific* understanding of the world. Before we proceed it is important to clarify what we mean by *science*. We are using the term to refer to an understanding of

the material world derived from an empirical process and operating under naturalistic premises (so focusing on the natural sciences). Given this understanding the Bible is not offering to explain how the material world works from a naturalistic perspective. This is entirely defensible for a number of reasons, but perhaps the most significant being that in the ancient world people did not have the category of "natural cause and effect." They understood a lot about cause and effect, but there was nothing natural about it. The only relevant causes were divine causes and human causes. This meant that the workings of the material world in naturalistic terms were of very little interest to them.[1] Their understanding was not naturalistic but one that integrated the transcendent into the world around them. They did not have a concept of natural laws (which are the foundation of all modern scientific work). Consequently, their observations about the world were inherently theological, not naturalistic. They were acutely interested in the relationship of God or the gods to the operations of the world. Much of what we think of in material terms they did not consider material.

The Bible gives us theological perspective about the material world (God has created it, he sustains it, it is contingent on him, he is sovereign over it, etc.), but it does not give us any naturalistic insight (which is precisely what science *does* do). Any information about the material world in the Bible is either a result of the most basic observation or represents a typical way of thinking in the ancient world. We will refer to this thinking as "Old World Science." This means that the information does not seek to penetrate the mechanistic workings of the material world or the shape of it. People in the ancient world are aware of the material world, but they do not care as much about it and don't prioritize exploration of it.

At the observation level, we might find that there is some convergence between how ancients think about the world and how we do. But aside from these areas of convergence, we will often find Old World Science to be contradictory to modern scientific conclusions. So, for example, there is convergence in the understanding that a person's existence as a living being has a lot to do with their blood. When a person's blood pours out to a certain extent, their life is gone. At the same time, the ancients were far from understanding the nature of the circulatory system by which the blood provides oxygen to the various organs of the body, and the Bible offers no authoritative teaching about how we should understand the circulatory system.

In Old World Science, the physiology of nearly all the bodily systems was largely misunderstood. Furthermore, although the sciences that we label meteorology and astronomy were of great interest to the ancients, their cosmic

geography offered little help in understanding how things really worked. Geology, hydrology and chemistry were unknown. Biology, particularly in the categories of zoology and botany, was of great interest and there was much observation taking place; lists were made (an exercise associated with wisdom and order) and rudimentary classifications established. As farmers and herdsmen they understood much about the practical aspects of breeding and planting, but their ignorance of genetics created misconceptions. The statement that the Bible is not a science textbook recognizes then that the Bible's illocutions do not offer scientific description or explanation.

No New Scientific Revelation

Agreement on this point should lead to the inevitable next conclusion (though it often does not), that is, that there is no new scientific revelation in the Bible. By this we mean that no statements in the Bible offered the original audience new insight into how the material world regularly works or how the naturalistic cause-and-effect system operates. We need to affirm this both in terms of hermeneutical theory and in terms of what we actually find in the Bible.

In terms of hermeneutical theory, we have identified the authority of the text as vested in the human communicator (whether the authority figure or those responsible for the literary/canonical product). That is because the human communicator is our only access to God's communication, which is our true source of authority. When speech-act terminology is brought into the discussion, we can say that the perspectives on the material world that we find in the text accommodate the Old World Science of the time and are part of the locution adopted in order to communicate clearly to the target audience. After all, some understanding of the world and its operations had to be used in some discussions in the text. Why would we think that the human communicator would use the science of our day? In fact, that would be foolishness because a century from now we will undoubtedly have adopted some new scientific conclusions that differ from what we believe today.[2] Science is always changing, and it is expected that continuous progress will be made. God chose human communicators associated with a particular time, language and culture and communicated through them into that world. The Bible was written *to* them, not us. It has information *for* us as we are able to penetrate the message being conveyed by the human communicators to their audience.

In hermeneutical theory, we are not free to read our own illocutions and meanings into the locutions of the human communicator's (or so-called biblical author's) locutions. If an interpreter presumes the Bible is giving scientifically accurate information, he or she might be comfortable building statements of the text into an understanding of modern science. An example of this is when people read about the "waters above the sky" in Genesis 1 and therefore conclude that there must be waters above. They then devise a science to explain the waters above in modern terms rather than recognizing that this understanding (common in the ancient world) was accommodated by God as he sought to communicate through human instruments his own work in the world and his control of it.

The problem with this approach is that it assumes the text is offering modern scientific information to the ancient audience, even though this principle cannot be applied consistently. This approach is selective in where it attempts to extrapolate modern science from the text, and where it does so it is often at the expense of the meaning the ancient audience would have understood. Overall it assumes something about the nature of Scripture's revelation that cannot be hermeneutically defended or consistently executed. It misunderstands the nature of the Bible in that it assumes the Bible is vesting its authority in scientific statements.

Another interpretive approach regarding science does not seek to build science out of the biblical statements but attempts to read science in between the lines. Such interpreters might look to subtle statements in the text to which they can attach the big bang or sophisticated genetics. An example would be the observation that the Bible is right to put the creation of light before the heavenly bodies because according to the cosmogony described by the big bang theory, photons came into existence before stars. These practitioners are attributing to the text a meaning that the ancient human communicator could never have intended. Their defense is that God knows all and that these advanced meanings were built in by him for later generations to discern and appreciate.[3]

The problem here is also hermeneutical in nature. If authority is vested in the human communicator, then we are not free to attach other meanings to the text. We have no authority. To add our own meaning to the text is to dilute the text's authority. If God had other meanings beyond what he gave through the human biblical communicator, we have no reliable way to get to them except through later authority figures. We dare not imagine ourselves in that capacity lest the authority of the text end up residing in each individual reader.

We dare not assume that later interpreters can take on the mantle of authority

to draw out sophisticated scientific conclusions from this ancient text; it misappropriates authority to the reader, as it fails to limit itself to how the communication between the authority figure and his target audience would have been understood. Authority can only reside in that matrix of communication. These interpretive approaches, far from defending the reputation of the Bible (apologetics), actually subvert the authority of the Bible. The Bible offers no new revelation of the workings of the material world, even though it offers to the original audience a revised vision of their theology concerning God's work in the world.

In terms of what we actually find in the Bible, we can again affirm that there is no new scientific revelation. Every statement of the Bible that pertains to the understanding and regular operation of the material world was already known by the Israelites and widely believed in the ancient world. Everyone believed that there were waters above. Everyone believed that the earth was round (but disk, not sphere—also confirmed in Isaiah 40:22). Everyone believed that cognitive and emotional processes took place in the entrails, and Israel had no different perception. God obviously felt free to accommodate these aspects of Old World Science, offering no corrective or qualification. The Bible is not a science textbook (so God was not offering scientific truth for the ages), nor does it provide any new scientific information (but rather accommodates the thinking its audience had). This Old World Science should be viewed as part of the locutionary framework by which communication is taking place. Authority is not found in the locution, but has to come through the illocution.

What We Should Look For

So the Bible's objective is not science, and the Bible in fact offers no new scientific advances or explanation. The last step is the most controversial, but it follows logically from the first two: We should not expect to be able to draw many, if any, necessary, mandated conclusions about the regular material operations and nature of the cosmos to which we could attach biblical authority. Scripture is not making those sorts of claims. This would include current ongoing material processes as well as material origins—conclusions drawn about the material world that can be investigated and either confirmed or denied by scientific study. Scientific investigation, for its part, cannot either affirm or deny theological beliefs such as God's role in creation, the origin of sin, the

spiritual nature of humans or the image of God in us. These are theological beliefs not in the purview of science. In the same way the naturalistic operations of the material world and the investigation of its mechanics are matters for science and are not determined by the biblical text.

On the basis of theological conclusions we might contest metaphysical conclusions scientists sometimes espouse (e.g., people are nothing but biological organisms), but in this case *their* claim is not a *scientific* conclusion; it is a metaphysical conclusion that science cannot properly address (though some attempt it and believe that science will eventually develop methods for doing so). The Bible's claims (drawn from its illocutions) would rarely if ever determine the nature of *scientific* conclusions,[4] though we may disagree with scientific conclusions either because of our *interpretation* of the Bible or because of our skepticism about the validity of the science.

Again, we must immediately clarify that the Bible *does* carry claims about the material world that are *theologically* essential (God is creator of it, sovereign over it, etc.)—but we would maintain that strictly speaking, these are theological claims, not scientific ones. Likewise, we routinely draw conclusions about the material world from our biblical interpretations. But if the Bible does not have scientific objectives and does not reveal any new science to its audience, then its explicit statements about the material world are part of the locution and would naturally accommodate the beliefs of the ancient world. As such they are not vested with authority.[5] We cannot encumber with scriptural authority any scientific conclusions we might deduce from the biblical text about the material world, its history or its regular processes. This would mean that we cannot draw scientific conclusions about areas such as physiology, meteorology, astronomy, cosmic geography, genetics or geology from the Bible. For example, we should believe that God created the universe, but we should not expect to be able to derive from the biblical texts the methods that he used or the time that it took. We should believe that God created humans in his image and that through the choices they made sin and death came into the world.[6] Scientific conclusions, however, relating to the material processes of human origins (whether from biology in general or genetics in particular) may be outside of the purview of the Bible. We need to ask whether the Bible is making those sorts of claims in its illocutions.

We propose that the Bible typically does not offer information about these aspects of the physical world that science could either prove or disprove. The Bible's claims regarding the origins, mechanics or shape of the world are, by

definition of the focus of its revelation, in the theological realm—that is, they pertain to the nature of God's involvement and activity. This is not to say that the Bible has no *historical* claims or entailments; it certainly does, though we must read carefully to discern precisely what claims are being made. There could also potentially be texts that touch on origins that could be making historical claims. We must carefully investigate whether the claims being made are theological, cosmological, scientific and/or historical.

The process of moving from God's Word to God's world is fraught with challenges. Of the *text* we are certain and confident, but we then must interpret the *meaning* of the text and determine what *claims* the text is thereby making. As a last step we must determine whether such claims lead to larger *entailments*. An example of these steps:

> *Text:* Genesis 1 uses the word *yôm*, translated "day."
>
> *Meaning:* Interpretation varies as to whether this refers to a twenty-four-hour period or a longer, variable period of time; following the former, interpreters would therefore identify particular associated claims.
>
> *Scientific claims:* The material earth was created by God in seven twenty-four-hour days.
>
> *Scientific entailments:* The earth and the universe are young; the big bang never happened; the expanding-universe concept is wrong.

These cannot be conflated inseparably as if they were all the same thing (i.e., "The Bible teaches that the earth is young").

In recent centuries, however, it has been commonplace for conclusions about the operations and understanding of the material world to be connected to the biblical text, both by the faithful who stand by such claims and make them litmus tests to orthodox faith, and by the skeptics who critique Christianity in accordance with presumed claims. Though the question of the age of the earth is in the center of just such a controversy, undoubtedly the largest controversy concerns the issue of evolution in general and human evolution in particular. The latter issue involves both theological claims and scientific claims, but it is necessary to separate them from one another.[7]

Discerning the Locutions of Old World Science

We maintain that the scientific claims the Bible is commonly proposed to make may usually, if not always, either be identified as Old World Science or as the result of interpretations (with other plausible alternatives). In the first category, for example, is the issue of the waters above mentioned earlier. We should not consider Genesis 1 (or any other reference) as mandating the scientific conclusion that there actually were waters above the earth. We have known for a long time that there are not, but that did not stop people from suggesting that something that we know of (e.g., clouds) were the waters above, or something that we might reconstruct from the past (some sort of vapor or ice canopy) constituted the waters above. These options violate biblical authority if those phenomena were not what the biblical communicator had in mind, nor what his audience understood when that language was used. Instead, we should recognize that the waters above represent an accommodation to Old World Science communicating in a context in which everyone believed that there was a body of water suspended above the earth by some sort of solid dome. As part of the locution, that accommodation does not presume to carry authority, and we don't have to concern ourselves with trying to defend the honor of the Bible by finding a modern scientific explanation for the waters above. The Bible is not making a scientific claim, and there is therefore no scientific entailment that derives from the Bible's reference to those waters.

We could also point to examples in which the statements of the Bible are built on simple observation, and therefore make no scientific claims. For example, one could easily infer from the statements in the biblical text that the sun and moon share space with the birds (Gen 1). But this is simply a reflection of Old World Science, and we attach no authority to that conclusion. Rather we consider it a matter of deduction on the part of ancients who had no reason to know any better. To say it another way, we associate it with the locution of the text that accommodates an observer's point of view and carries neither authority nor scientific entailments.

In the second category, some presumed scientific claims or entailments need to be recognized as a matter of extrapolated interpretation that is neither intrinsic nor inevitable. In these cases the Bible is not talking about science at all (in contrast to the previous category when it was just Old World Science). In this category other issues are in play, but scientific conclusions are being drawn by modern readers.

- It is not unusual to encounter people who believe, because of Genesis 2:21, that women have one more rib than men. Here they have drawn a scientific deduction (in this case pertaining to anatomy) from an interpretation of a biblical passage.
- Many people interpret Genesis 3:14 as requiring the scientific conclusion that snakes used to have legs, talk and actually eat dust.
- It used to be more common for people to interpret the curse of Ham as carrying a scientific entailment concerning a physiological effect on black-skinned people, the putative descendants of Ham.[8]

In all of these cases *scientific* deductions were made from *interpretations* of the biblical text. It would be a mistake to think that the biblical teaching demanded these conclusions or that such entailments were vested with biblical authority. They are interpretations ranging from dubious to outright offensive.[9] In each of these cases, plausible (and sometimes clearly preferable) interpretations can be offered, thus demonstrating that the scientific claims or entailments attached to one interpretation cannot be considered to represent the authority of the text itself. The concern here is not which science we adopt, but under what circumstances scientific claims or entailments of any sort could ever carry the authority of Scripture.

What we want to know, then, is whether a scientific conclusion is the result of only one interpretation of the biblical text while there are other plausible interpretations (plausible in that they account for the analysis of the biblical text and the generally recognized nonnegotiables of theology). If that is the case, one may still choose to maintain the scientific entailment but cannot attribute biblical authority to that entailment (or accuse those who reject the entailment of abandoning biblical authority). Acceptance of the entailment cannot be seen as a matter of either authority or inerrancy.

In some cases the traditional interpretations that lead to scientific claims and entailments are simpler and have been considered more plausible, but if the science becomes overwhelmingly demonstrated, an alternate interpretation with less plausibility on its own (but still accounting for the analysis of the biblical text and the generally recognizable nonnegotiables of theology) may come to be considered preferable. The question of importance for this chapter is not how overwhelming the scientific evidence must be or how plausible an alternative interpretation is; we are dealing here with whether the issue can be considered

one of biblical authority.[10]

If a proposed interpretation is carried out using sound methods, affirming biblical authority, respecting the intention of the human authority and embracing core theology, it should not be easily dismissed as a rejection of biblical authority. Legitimate interpretation can succeed in communicating the authoritative content of the Bible. Evangelical biblical interpreters have always recognized that there could be several interpretations that do that, but interpretations still need to be evaluated for how they build their case on the biblical and theological data. Our interpretations are not authoritative; they only have the potential to lead us to authority.

In conclusion, we have proposed that reticence to identify scientific claims or entailments is the logical conclusion from the first two points (not a science textbook; no new scientific revelation) and that a proper understanding of biblical authority is dependent on recognizing this to be true. The Bible's authority is bound into theological claims and entailments about the material world. We are not trying to say that our biblical interpretations don't or shouldn't lead to scientific conclusions. We are making the simple point that the authority of the text is not bound up in those scientific conclusions. This being the case, such scientific conclusions should not stand as litmus tests concerning whether one maintains biblical authority.

The position we have taken is not a refutation of those who find convergence between modern science and the biblical text. In convergence, researchers are seeking statements in the Bible that are compatible with modern science. The truths discovered by modern science would be expected to be compatible with Scripture, though one could also find compatibility with scientific understandings of the past that are no longer believed to be true (e.g., steady state universe), so we should exercise caution. More importantly, however, we must recognize that the search for compatible truths is not the same as the search for the authoritative claims of the Bible. We may be able to find statements in the Bible that are compatible with big bang cosmology, but that does not mean that the Bible makes authoritative claims about the big bang.

Stepping Back and Summing Up

How the Composition of the Old Testament May Be Understood Differently in Light of What Is Known of Ancient Literary Culture

Based on the evidence laid out in the four preceding propositions, we can now consider alternative scenarios for the composition of biblical books. These are broad stroke and preliminary; discussion starters, not final conclusions.

Authorities and Tradents

The doctrinal discussion of biblical authority, especially in relation to the rise of critical scholarship, has often included questions concerning the identification of authors and the composition of the books. This focus can now be seen as encumbered with anachronistic ideas. We should be more interested in Moses as the *authority* whose words are represented in the Pentateuch rather than as the *author* of the Pentateuch or any of its *books*. As the represented authority his words were undoubtedly generating documents. Though he may well have received training in scribal practice, it is more likely that he would have had scribes who could actually do the writing. This would not contradict the instructions that he write or the statements that he did so. It would be commonly understood that a scribe would be employed in the process.

That Moses is the authority whose words are represented and that he was generating documents can be readily accepted. Moses was generating information (sermons, rulings, narratives) that would be considered important enough to preserve in written documents. Some undoubtedly would have been recorded in his time and under his supervision. Others may well have been produced by later generations after some time of oral transmission. It matters neither how much material is in each category nor which portions are which; the authority derives from Moses and he is inseparable from the material.[1]

In contrast, whatever role Moses had in Genesis would be the role of tradent as opposed to the role of authority since Genesis never invokes Moses' authority

for the traditions that it contains. Even if Moses were considered one of the primary tradents for Genesis (certainly reasonable), there would be no reason to consider him the first, the last or the only tradent.

In like manner, a prophet like Isaiah would be viewed as the authority figure speaking the word of God prophetically. He would not be thought of as an author in any way similar to the way we think about authors today. Scribes would generate documents that preserved these important sacred words delivered by God's chosen representative. At some point those individual documents (his oracles) would be compiled into the book we know as Isaiah. We do not know when that work was done and do not need to know. The answer to that question would not affect the authority of the book or have anything to do with inerrancy.

Other biblical books follow the same sort of pattern. Narrative works such as Joshua, Judges or Samuel show clear evidence of documents (individual narratives) that have been compiled meaningfully and purposefully into longer literary products. Psalms are individual compositions (documents), and over the last decades much progress has been made in understanding the process by which they were compiled to produce the book that is in our Bible. Proverbs specifically mentions one stage of the process of compilation (Prov 25:1).

In the narrative literature there is no attribution of the documents to an authority. This is standard procedure in the ancient world. Tradents would have been responsible for using the traditions and documents at their disposal to create this literature. Critical scholarship has often sought to attach the literature to a regime (David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Josiah) or to a crisis period in history (postexilic period). Such connections are not impossible but are largely inconsequential. Their speculative nature limits their usefulness.

Traditional interpreters among the rabbis and church fathers identified David and Solomon as the authorities behind Psalms and Proverbs respectively, not without the support of textual allusions. Such allusions, however, fail to distinguish clearly what role each might have played (e.g., composer? collector?). Again, there is no reason to doubt that David and Solomon had their roles, but determining the exact nature of each role would make little difference in the end.

Given what we have learned about literary production in the ancient world, authorship and the process that led to the final form of the canonical book are simply not as relevant as we have thought to our understanding of biblical authority. We need to develop new models that are based on an understanding of the roles of authorities, the nature of documents and the transmission of tradition

in hearing-dominant societies. Even as we do so, we dare not be too optimistic about our ability to comprehend the details or reconstruct the process. Our task is as much directed toward weeding out our anachronistic misconceptions as it is toward defining the new scenario. If anachronism is a main flaw of traditional thinking about the Bible, critical scholars too often couple their own form of anachronism (books, authors and literary compositions) with an overestimation of the entailments and implications of their speculations, especially in regard to undermining traditionalism. They are too often overconfident in their ability to identify sources and reconstruct composition.

Expansions and Revisions

In this discussion, we need not concern ourselves with actually identifying sections of biblical text that some might think represent later additions or interpretations by later generations of scribes. We are not confident that we have the ability to make such identifications. Nevertheless, the existence of such practices is evident not only in the claims of the text itself, but also in the transmission of the text. For example, expansion is attested in the comparison of the Hebrew text of Jeremiah with its shorter Greek translation (itself attested in a Hebrew fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls).[2] We should be more interested in the theory question: given, for the sake of argument, that the transmission process and standard scribal practice allowed for this level of activity, what impact would that have on our understanding of biblical authority?

When we talk about the authority of Scripture, we can now see that we cannot construe authority around the idea that each book of the Bible was first constructed as a literary document—a book, by an author. Biblical authority has to be understood in connection to two focal points in the history of the composition: (1) at the fountainhead is either an authority figure who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, generated the information (e.g., Moses, Jeremiah) or, more abstractly, the tradition itself (passed on by various tradents) whose origins are untraceable (e.g., narratives whether in Genesis or Judges); (2) on the brink of canon is the final form, which is the product of a scribal group or groups whose time period and motivations cannot easily be determined, and which comes at the end of what may have been a long, complex process of transmission and composition. Some community of people, we believe under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, determined that certain individuals, as well as

certain traditions unattached to specific individuals, had authority—God's authority. We have accepted those judgments made by that community of faith and affirmed by its successors. In Israel of both Old and New Testament periods, the temple had a major role to play in this process. This is not a surprise given the role of temple personnel throughout the ancient world as traditions were maintained and transmitted. Likewise communities of faith determined that certain literary works at the end of the process ought to be accorded the status of canon. We have accepted those judgments as also happening under the supervision of the Holy Spirit.

Later Compilation

We don't know when final compilation took place. The document phase that coexisted with the oral phase could have constituted the main written form for centuries. Let's consider for example the case of the Pentateuch. The biblical tradition and those of us who take that tradition seriously consider Moses as the fountainhead of the material. For Genesis, as noted above, Moses would be considered more a tradent than the authority figure since he is not named there. Though the community would have been steeped in the traditions of the patriarchs, we could posit that the scribes in the time of Moses may also have had family documents from the patriarchs passed down through the generations. Perhaps for material in Genesis 1–11 Moses and his associates continued to frame those traditions orally for their audience and perhaps recorded them in documents as well (as Hezekiah's men later gathered the wisdom sayings of Solomon), though in this we can only speculate. Material pertaining to the parts of the Pentateuch contemporary with Moses would also have been preserved in documents as God instructed and as Moses is recorded as doing. But these all remain individual documents in an archive traveling around with the Israelites, periodically recopied as they moved into the new land throughout the time of the judges.

At some point—maybe as early as the judges period, but more likely later on in the monarchy (even if it were as late as the postexilic period it would not matter)—scribes who were engaged in editorial, literary activity shaped those archived documents into the larger literary works that we know as the books of the Pentateuch. Who did this and when? We don't know, and it does not matter (though we can't help being curious). They were engaged in creative ways of

preserving the authoritative traditions for their contemporary audiences; they were scribal tradents. Such compiling of documents into literary compositions would stand as evidence that transition to textual significance had begun. These literary compositions would have had some circulation as documents but, especially at the beginning, would have been held accountable to the oral traditions.

It is important to note that when citations are made later in time of an earlier tradition, it is the authority figure who is rightfully identified. It is no surprise that throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament reference is made to the book (that is, document) of Moses or the Torah of Moses. Likewise when later reference is made to what has become the book of Isaiah, Isaiah is being identified as the authority figure behind the material, not as an "author" of a "book." It does not matter who put the book together and when, and it does not even matter whether communities of faith decided to include later oracles of Isaiah's successors in the collection; if they did so, it would only be because those later oracles were all still rightfully connected to Isaiah's authority in the eyes of those communities of faith.

When the New Testament speakers refer to the work of Isaiah, they are referring to the literary documents in their time that have been subsumed under the authority of the prophet. This has nothing to do with authorship, and therefore we ought not be including discussions of Isaiah as the "author" of his "book" when we talk about inerrancy. The claim being made concerns Isaiah's unquestioned role as the authority figure behind that literature. We know that such citations in the New Testament cite only traditional authority figures because Jude makes reference to the book of Enoch and cites Enoch as the authority figure at the fountainhead of that stream of tradition (Jude 14-15). Evangelicals who support the inerrancy of the text have never believed that they must therefore conclude that Enoch actually was the author of the book of Enoch.[3] Such New Testament citations have little to do with the discussion of inerrancy, and now, on the basis of what we have learned about the complex process of composition, we can see more clearly the affirmations such citations are making.

The model proposed here differs significantly from classical source criticism. In the traditional source-critical view, *literary* works designated J, P and D are posited as the achievement of different schools at different periods. (Scholarly dispute continues concerning which schools and which periods.) Often driven by skepticism, the proposals of such literary sources serve as alternatives to the idea

of the traditional authorities associated with the material. So, for example, most source critics would not believe that Moses had anything to do with the Pentateuch, and many would doubt that the Moses of the Pentateuch even really existed. In the model we have proposed, the existence and role of Moses are both heartily affirmed and remain central in the preserved tradition. Moses is considered the principal, dominant and determinative voice—the authority figure at the fountainhead of what eventually became the literature associated with him. In this way we reject the skepticism of critical scholarship.

A second difference is that source theory is potentially guilty of anachronism by positing complex literary compositions at too early a period, which are then supposed to have been torn apart to form new compositions. This is one of the reasons we have seen the trend to move the sources from the monarchy period to the postexilic or even Hellenistic periods.[4] Third, traditional source criticism is too confident about its ability to locate the voices of different sources and to identify when those sources worked and what movements they represented. We are making no such claims because we take the text seriously when it identifies an authority figure whose material the literary works preserve.

Despite these significant differences, the model we have proposed agrees with traditional source criticism in that it understands the final literary form of the biblical books to be relatively late and generally not the literary product of the authority figure whose words the book preserves. As we have proposed it, however, this late result of a long process does not undermine inerrancy or the authority of the book. The Holy Spirit is behind the whole process from beginning to end. No claims made by the book are to be doubted—we just need to be clear what claims are being made.

A final issue to consider before summarizing conclusions about the composition of biblical texts is the impact of this model on textual criticism. Within evangelical circles discussing inerrancy and authority, the common affirmation is that the text is inerrant in the original autographs. This qualification allowed the recognition that scribes copying the text from generation to generation made errors in the copying process. Therefore, since all copies were not pristine, inerrancy could only be connected to the putative originals—though it has always been viewed as problematic that we did not have any such originals. Instead, we have relied on textual criticism to allow us confidence that what we have well represents the originals or that the originals could be successfully reconstructed through textual criticism.[5] The question has often been raised by proponents as well as opponents, students as well as

scholars: if we have no originals and in some places little confidence that we know what such originals would have said, what good is it to attach inerrancy and authority to originals? Furthermore, people who have no access to Greek and Hebrew wonder whether they can rely on their translations (far removed from any such originals).

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the middle of the twentieth century had the immediate effect of indicating that our previously earliest manuscripts (the product of the Masoretic tradition dated to the ninth through eleventh centuries A.D.) had been faithfully preserved when compared to the now-available Hebrew manuscripts from the second century B.C. through the first century A.D. As scholars continued to work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, it became increasingly clear that multiple textual traditions were preserved among the scrolls (especially for the books of Samuel and Jeremiah). Consequently, at least in some cases, it became clear that there was not only one original form of the final literary piece. For the book of Jeremiah, for example, it appears that one group in one place compiled a collection of documents containing the prophet's oracles, while another group in another place did the same. Both groups used a core group of documents (indicated by their high degree of similarity), but made different choices in final stages about what to include and how to order the oracles. Which should be considered the "original"? Does it make any difference?[6]

In the model that we have proposed here, it does not matter. The authority is associated with Jeremiah, no matter which compilation is used. We cannot be dependent on the "original autographs," not only because we do not have them, but also because the very concept is anachronistic for most of the Old Testament[7] and does not reflect how the books came into existence. Inerrancy and authority are connected initially to the authority figure or the authoritative traditions. We further accept the authority represented in the form of the book adopted by faith communities and given canonical status. This does not help us to resolve problem passages where transmission has been imperfect, but it gives us a basis for affirming the authority of the text despite those scattered problems.

For several decades evangelical scholars have recognized these problems and have repeatedly discussed what it is that we are trying to recover when we do textual criticism.[8] What does textual criticism try to achieve? Current theory focuses on trying to identify errors in the transmission process and to resolve textual variations where evidence may exist that one preserved reading is derived from another preserved reading. This approach attempts to produce a

pristine canonical final form without presupposing whether multiple textual traditions existed side by side on the way to that form. In this view, inerrancy and authority attach to the final canonical form of the book rather than to putative original autographs. Of course, this would be no problem in places where the two could be identified as one and the same.

We should remember, however, that this canonical final form does not override the authority figures or the traditions that preceded it. The final form has authority because it is believed to embody what those traditions and authority figures communicated. The Holy Spirit guides every part of the process, but this does not mean that just anyone could make pronouncements and claim the authority of the Holy Spirit.

Biblical Composition and Authority

What can we conclude then about biblical authority as it relates to compositional issues?

Authority is not dependent on an original autograph or on an *author* writing a *book*. Recognition of authority is identifiable in the beliefs of a community of faith (of whom we are heirs) that God's communications through authoritative figures and traditions have been captured and preserved through a long process of transmission and composition in the literature that has come to be accepted as canonical. That authority can be well represented in translation, though it can be undermined to the extent that interpretation (necessary for translation to take place) misrepresents the authority. This presents a practical and utilitarian perspective on authority. We will discuss further how inerrancy relates to this after we have discussed issues of genre.

Based on the theory already discussed and described, the following is how the composition of specific books might be understood.

Genesis: Documents used in the compilation of Genesis are likely identified in the text itself (in eleven occurrences of "This is the account of . . ."). No identification of the source of the traditions represented in the individual documents is offered, and this is not unusual. Documents such as those found in the first part of the book (Gen 1–11) as well as those in the second part (Gen 12–50) would correspond well, if only generally, to the sort that would be familiar in the ancient world. Likewise no indication is given in the book itself of the time or circumstances under which these documents were compiled into the book as

we know it. Earliest tradition associated the work with Moses, and given the stature of Moses that is not unreasonable, but we need not decide the matter. As discussed above, his role is best understood as tradent, not likely that of actually generating the traditions (though he may have generated some of them—we particularly think of the creation accounts in this regard). More likely—perhaps as the sponsor of a scribal school—he would have made sure that such traditions were preserved in written documents where they would be placed in the archives of the people of Israel. That would be sufficient to associate him with those documents. Compilation of those documents into the complex literary work we call Genesis may not have happened for many centuries, though the traditions would have been well known. The compiled book eventually was given its place as a prologue to those more specifically attached to Moses, but the authority of the traditions is not dependent on that association.

Exodus through Numbers: These books comprise the documents of the wilderness period, and therefore fall under the direct authority of Moses. They represent the sorts of documents that would be logical for a society in the Late Bronze Age to produce. Ugarit, from roughly the same period, gives evidence of such variegated and diverse archives. Legal collections integrated with covenant documents, narratives, rituals and shrine building accounts are all common genres for documents in the second millennium. Again, however, we have much less information about when these documents of the wilderness would have been compiled into the books that we know. That could have been a long and gradual process. The eventual literary compositions would carry the authority of Moses because the documents carried the authority of Moses. He would be more readily identifiable as the one generating these documents since he was the closest to a king that Israel had. Such authorities are more likely to be named.

Deuteronomy: The book of Deuteronomy explicitly claims to preserve oral traditions originating with Moses as well as documents that he generated. There is no reason to doubt that Moses generated such documents or that they were preserved. The idea that the archive of these documents could have been expanded and revised over centuries would not be without precedent in the ancient world. At this point we can affirm that Moses should indeed be considered the authority behind this material, though the final form of the book may have come much later. Despite the significant role that a document related to Deuteronomy played in the reform of Josiah, there is no indication that some part of the compilation process took place at that time. Josiah or Hilkiah would have had no reason to suppress any role they might have had in producing a

literary composition (as is sometimes alleged in discussions of Deuteronomy) because the existence of the *book* is not what is important. The rediscovery of an ancient lost tradition preserved in a document (2 Kings 22:8 uses a singular form) would be more significant.

Narrative books: Individual narratives represent individual traditions and perhaps could have been preserved in individual documents, though not necessarily so. Their main currency would have been oral. As is commonly the case, we have no indication of the origin of narrative traditions, so no individual authority figure is associated with them. We have no indications of when the documents were compiled by tradents into books outside of chance comments that they might offer, which are not very determinative. It is logical to conclude that the individual books were compiled into literary works individually (since varieties of literary strategies are evident, e.g., the cycles of the judges). Yet a further stage could well have included compiling those literary works into a larger edited edition such as is proposed of the Deuteronomistic History. Chronicles evidences more clearly than most books its dependence on individual documents as sources for presenting its view of history and offers objective evidence for compositional freedom.

Job: As the wisdom book that it is, the book of Job has no authority figure identified with the tradition. The narrative tradition of Job's life may well have independent origins. In keeping with what has been said above, that tradition, presumably arising from the experiences of a real person in antiquity, may have been used as the basis for the wisdom book much later. Nevertheless, the authority lies in the final form of the book, and its literary coherence suggests a single composition (though this does not rule out independently circulating narratives of the trials of righteous Job). The flow of the argument of the book must have been composed as a literary piece since all of the parts contribute so significantly. Literarily it appears irreducibly complex.[9]

Psalms: Our book of Psalms is composed of 150 originally independent documents. Some of them may have been oral compositions that remained in oral form for generations. Others may have been written compositions from the start. The psalm titles indicate that David is attached as an authority figure to many of the psalms, though his association could be represented in a variety of roles (fountainhead, composer, compiler or sponsor). Other individuals also appear as authority figures (e.g., Asaph). The independent documents were gradually compiled into the five books of the canonical book of Psalms, as all scholars agree and as is indicated by a notation such as that found in Psalm

72:20. The authority of the book attaches to its character as representing the hymnic traditions of Israel, regardless of who the composers or compilers were.

Proverbs: As with David's role in Psalms, Solomon is the authority figure most prominently associated with the book of Proverbs, as indicated in Proverbs 1:1, 10:1 and 25:1. Also as in Psalms, these notations do not specify whether Solomon is composer, collector, compiler or sponsor, and it does not matter to the authority of the book. Others have contributed to the book (Prov 30–31), and Hezekiah's role is mentioned prominently (Prov 25:1). We need not think of each proverb as an independent document. Wisdom sayings were primarily passed on in oral form, and compiling lists of brief wisdom sayings is one of the earliest traditions of wisdom communities.

Ecclesiastes: This book is an unknown scholar's presentation of the wisdom of an individual he mysteriously calls Qoheleth, who is positioned as the authority figure behind this wisdom tradition. Some have concluded that Solomon is the actual authority figure, but the scholar who is presenting the wisdom teaching is obviously not relying on that identification to validate the wisdom.

Song of Songs: Solomon's name, and perhaps part of his story, are invoked here, and he should therefore be seen as an authority figure connected in some way to the composition. It is difficult to say more beyond that. If there are a number of originally independent documents (i.e., individual love songs) represented here, it is clear that they have been woven together in the composition process and given a wisdom focus (Song 8:6-7). Such love poetry had gained status as authoritative tradition perhaps through long use in harvest festivals (if Egyptian love poetry offers any guidance for the social location).

Prophets: We have discussed specifics about Isaiah and Jeremiah above, so here we can offer a few general comments in summary. In all of the prophetic books the prophet is the authority figure whose oracles are being presented. The prophets delivered their oracles orally, as is evident throughout the books. It would be no surprise that scribes (e.g., Baruch) took up the task to record oracles in individual documents. These documents would carry the authority of the prophet. Whether in the lifetime of the prophet or some generations later, a compilation process obviously took place to create the collections that we have as the prophetic books. We have nothing that indicates who is responsible for that work. The prophets' disciples or successors may or may not have been involved. We cannot rule out the possibility that material could have been added or the oracles revised over time.[10] At this point we want to emphasize that given

the earlier discussion we no longer should be concerned about the prophets as *authors* of their *books*. Our interest is in the identity of the prophet as the authority figure behind the oracles, regardless of the composition history of the book. As we have seen, this is of great value when discussing the question of the "original manuscript" of a book such as Jeremiah and its variety of forms. The prophets may have any variety of relationships with the biblical books that bear their name and preserve the authoritative words that God gave them.

In all of these paragraphs, we have attempted to reflect a minimal level of conclusions. We do not need to achieve certainty about the "authorship" of a "book" in order to accept its authoritative status in the canon. We need not think that a book was written all at once as a literary piece in the time when the traditions it holds originated. At the same time, we need not be skeptical about believing that early authorities, traditions or documents underlie the eventual literary compositions. We need not propose late invention of traditions or authority figures to coincide with the dates that we would most easily attach to final composition. We have no reason to think that authority figures are the imaginative products of late scribes engaged in false pretenses, chicanery or deception. We are willing to credit the integrity of the scribal institution and the wisdom of the faith communities that oversaw the process from century to century. We should be reticent to think that we can reconstruct literary precursors to the final compositions, let alone identify supposed sources that contributed and the chronology of the compilation process. We may well believe that there was such a process that led from traditions to documents to literary works to final-form canonical literature, but we should be realistically suspicious about our ability to trace that process. Had we the ability, such tracing may well satisfy our intellectual curiosity, but would be practically irrelevant since it would not affect the authority attached to either the figure that is portrayed as the fountainhead or to the final product. Neither faith nor skepticism can be the *assured result* of such an investigation. Such stances reflect more the starting point than the end result. Those who take the Bible seriously, as we do, will want to affirm the text in its identification of authority figures and accept as valid the work of those compilers of the canonical form of the books who have incorporated the traditions of those authority figures into the books that we now possess. The combined result is an authoritative text that we hold in high esteem. This understanding is based on a faithful and ethical reading of the biblical text, in contrast to a skeptical reading that routinely suspects misrepresentation.

The role of this authoritative text as the inspired revelation of God will be

developed and discussed in later chapters. Among the advantages of a model like this is that it helps us to see how the authority of the originator of the tradition or document (e.g., Moses, Jeremiah) continues to carry through into the translations of today though these translations are not the words of the authority figure. Another advantage is that such a model helps us to hold firmly to the affirmations the Bible makes about itself, yet also allows us to adopt some of the more important advances that critical scholarship has offered, thus resulting in a faithful reading of the canon combined with a nuanced understanding of the literature.

Part 2

The New Testament World of Composition and Communication

Proposition 5

Much of the Literature of the Greco-Roman World Retained Elements of a Hearing-Dominant Culture

In this chapter we take the first step toward understanding the literary production of the New Testament. The starting point is the culture of the Greeks and Romans and how their literature was formed and functioned. Through their eyes and ears we will discover important things about the oral culture behind the New Testament.

As citizens of Western civilization, learning about our roots in Greece and Rome generally seems a noble thing to do. We admire the monuments, government and literature. We're enamored of the possibility that the Greeks and Romans—with their own history and literature spanning a thousand years—produced more outstanding accomplishments than the thousand years of world history before or after their time. We're impressed by sweeping statements such as that of Samuel Johnson, the famed poet and essayist of eighteenth-century England, that "all our religion, almost all our law, almost all our arts, almost all that sets us above savages, has come to us from the shores of the Mediterranean."[1] But learning the intricacies of the culture of our Greek and Roman ancestors seems increasingly irrelevant in our modern society. Important aspects of ancient culture easily fade into the distant past. Who did what, when, where and why is lost on contemporary society's greater fascination with itself and what's happening in the present.

Similarly, for many readers of the Bible learning about Greco-Roman culture generally seems noble but unnecessary. The Bible, after all, is the Word of the eternal God, and to hear God speak who needs the Greeks and Romans? It is tempting to assume that infinite truth can be completely removed from finite culture, or that information from outside the Bible is not essential for interpretation inside the Bible, or that backgrounds are not crucial for applying Scripture to the issues of the twenty-first century. But such is not the case.

While the Bible is truly one of a kind—largely because it is God's kind—it bears clear marks of humankind. Divine truth is inextricably interwoven within human culture, which means the categories of thinking, the expressions, the

imagery, the motifs are drawn from the cultures in which God's truth became incarnate. It couldn't be any other way: it was necessary for God to speak in ways humans could understand, and he specifically chose the Greco-Roman-Jewish world of the first century for revealing the New Testament. Paul called it the fullness of times (Gal 4:4).

So in preparation for comprehending how the New Testament was written, we begin with the first generation of Greek literature and what that generation passed on to the second generation. The first generation was an oral phase. Literature began in the context of poets composing and performing their works without writing them down; prose, which came after poetry, could originate in oral settings as well. The second phase was a written phase. Surprisingly, when poetry and prose were recorded in written form, the oral features were not overtaken by the new medium.

There is another sense in which this chapter is about a first and second generation. Within the scope of Western civilization, the first generation of literature was written by the Greeks, the second by the Romans. Much of the latter was under the influence of much of the former. Oral features were common in both.

From the evidence presented in proposition 1, it is clear that in the ancient Near East information could be disseminated orally very effectively, and generally was. The cognitive environment was hearing dominant. Regarding the Greeks and the Romans, it seems logical that with all their literary accomplishments they would have become text dominant, that their literature would have become tied to words on a page, as is generally true in our cognitive environment. But was that the result? As we'll see, in many respects Greco-Roman literature, which came from oral settings, retained oral dimensions.

Though it would be appropriate for this chapter to survey all of Greek and Latin literature and to note the hundreds of examples of oral features, it would be a long chapter indeed, if not a book of its own. So our overview will be brief. Since the modern study of orality began with seeking to understand the oral nature of Homer's epics, that's where we will begin. Beyond that we will limit our remarks to a few other genres and authors and to some generalizations about Greek and Latin literature as a whole.

Orality and Textuality in Early Greek Poetry

Textuality (in the sense of written literature) did not emerge in the Greek world until about 700 B.C. Previously the Mycenaeans (c. 1500–1100 B.C.) used written language (now called Linear B) for administrative records, but they did not leave behind any literary texts. From the end of the Mycenaean age until the eighth century, there is little evidence of written documents in Greece. Their world was exclusively oral.

Seemingly out of nowhere, two full-blown epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, heralded the dawn of written literature in Greece. The poems were obviously the result of complex literary production. The *Iliad*, an exploration of the theme of anger in the context of the Trojan War (thought to have been fought around 1200 B.C.), consists of more than 15,600 lines; the *Odyssey*, an account of the adventures of Odysseus returning home years after the war was over, is 12,000 lines. The epics are the earliest and greatest works of all of Greek literature, dated to the late eighth or early seventh century.

Approximately at the same time as Homer, a poet named Hesiod produced two poems of his own, *Works and Days* and *Theogony*, the former offering moral and practical advice—especially regarding agriculture—and the latter recounting the origins and successions of the gods. Hesiod was an oral poet, but the person(s) who recorded his poems in writing is unknown.[2]

It was widely believed across the ancient world that Homer had composed both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But if so, how did such sophisticated poetry and artistic narrative appear so suddenly? Were there no precedents? Only in recent times have scholars come to understand more about the precursors to the written versions of the poems. They conclude that first there were oral performances, apparently by non-literates who recited increasingly fixed traditions about the Trojan War and the travels of Odysseus. Then there were poets who, remarkably, could do three things simultaneously: compose, perform and transmit. Without the help of writing, they adapted the traditions and re-created them in hexameter verse; they performed them for wide audiences and in so doing passed the stories along to others. This process occurred repeatedly over several hundred years. The product was oral literature.

In extant versions of the epics, the mixture of dialects and vocabulary—some older and some newer, some local and some from afar—suggests a wide-ranging transmission of the oral literature. Yet it all came together in two remarkably unified poems. The current consensus among scholars is that single “authors” were essentially responsible for each of the Homeric epics, though whether the two epics eventually came from the hands of the same individual (and whether

that person was named Homer) is unknown.

Since the earliest references to manuscripts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are closer to 500 B.C., the process of composition is unclear. Perhaps the "author" was an illiterate bard who mastered and perfected the performances of his predecessors. His poems would then have been transmitted by a guild of public reciters, with the epics being put into writing sometime later. On the other hand, if the "author" was literate, maybe he composed initial versions of the epics—or scribes wrote down his lines—with subsequent people of literary skill adding portions and making improvements. There could be a fluidity of text in written traditions as well as oral. (Book 10 of the *Iliad* in particular shows evidence of later additions.)

With the oral origin of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, where customary patterns and the repetition of standard phraseology were common, it was natural for those techniques to be preserved in written forms. Clearly, the transition from oral text to written text was not a clean break. Textuality tended to retain much of the inherent orality, in part because the new written forms were not thought of as something independent, different or better. The stories would continue to be performed for various audiences as before. The notion that individuals would read the books privately or that the written forms would have greater authority apparently never crossed people's minds at this stage.

This overview of the origins and orality of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reflects current conclusions of most Homeric scholarship. But throughout the twentieth century, scholars have experimented with and corrected various ideas about the poems. A turning point was the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord.[3] Seeking to understand the oral origins of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, they made comparisons with the singer of tales of the South Slavic lands. Their work confirmed the possibility that composers could create literature orally without having memorized poetry in advance, though they borrowed from stock phrases. This in turn helped to explain various readings in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.[4] But even with the best of scholarly theories, the oral composition and transmission of the poems—eventually committed to writing—is beyond full comprehension in our modern world of textuality.

Orality in Greek and Latin Written Texts

The works of Homer and Hesiod were just the beginning of the growth spurt of

Greek literature. Greek poetry gradually developed into a variety of forms, now generally classified as three genres: epic, lyric and drama. Poets like Pindar, Sappho, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and Menander were masters of composing poetry for public performance, with hundreds of tragedies and comedies intended for Greek theaters demonstrating many marks of orality. Beyond the arena of theatrical performances, professional poets made a living performing in royal courts and before various audiences.

The symposium was one of the common settings in the Greek world for hearing poetry presented orally. But a *symposium* then was different from what we think of when we hear the word now. A symposium was a celebration of wine, traditional values and male relationships. A group of thirty or fewer men, often clothed in festive attire, gathered for an evening of pleasures, usually including oral performances of a number of forms of poetry. Plato and Xenophon both wrote literary works modeled after a symposium. In the Hellenistic and Roman world, poetry was commonly composed with symposia specifically in mind.

Prose was a secondary development in the history of Greek literature, appearing at least one hundred years after poetry. Why literature in verse preceded prose is not entirely clear; perhaps it was related to poetry being easier to memorize for public recitation. The first major genre of prose was history. As the people living in Greece became more self-consciously Greek, establishing and preserving their identity by writing history increased in importance.

Herodotus, for example, collected information from oral sources and from his own observations in order to compile his stories. Either there were no written sources available or he disregarded written documents as sources of information. He apparently gave lectures about his discoveries in various places in the Greek world, the lectures being a form of oral literature. Later he composed written accounts, organizing the material from his lectures into an extended history. Above all else, Herodotus sought to be a good storyteller, for he expected what he wrote to be performed orally.[5]

Following Herodotus, there were many other Greek historians of note.[6] Thucydides wrote a very different kind of history, in part because he was writing about the Peloponnesian Wars in which he was involved, and in part because he was writing for contemporaries who had experienced the wars alongside him. His sources were also largely oral. (We will return to Herodotus and Thucydides in proposition 7.)

Oratory became prominent later in the fifth century with famous orators like

Lysias, Isocrates and Demosthenes, and many of their speeches have been preserved in writing.[7] By their very nature, orations are oral literature: they originated as speeches and were composed to be heard. Even if a speech was written, the goal was to present it in a way that gave the impression it was extemporaneous. Michael Gagarin demonstrates that an oration composed for oral performance was very different from prose written to be read. He analyzes various oral dimensions present in orations that have been preserved in written form.[8] (For a discussion of philosophical writings, see proposition 7.)

By the third century B.C., literary self-consciousness had developed to the extent that books were collected from all across the ancient world and analyzed, compared and edited. For example, the library in Alexandria, Egypt—the literary capital of the Hellenistic world—was collecting scrolls that would eventually number over 100,000 (some sources say 700,000). Specialists—today we call them philologists—focused especially on the works of Homer, Pindar and the Greek dramatists. The philologists compiled lexicons of rare words, collated manuscripts, produced critical texts, examined questions of authorship, composed line-by-line commentaries and so forth. Careful examination of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* led some of these scholars to insert lines that appeared to them to be missing or, in rare cases, to delete lines that did not seem to be original.

But even with the increasing focus on written texts in the Hellenistic period, a culture of orality was still prominent. David Aune amasses considerable evidence for orality in later Greek literature, such as in the Greek author Pausanias in the second century A.D.[9] Literature continued to be performed orally, sometimes at public events, sometimes at private dinners, sometimes for the masses, sometimes for the educated. Itinerant performers moved from city to city reciting literary compositions. So the distinction between written texts to be read and oral texts to be heard remained blurred.

Underlying all of this discussion of literature and performance is the matter of literacy. Could people have read literary texts if they wanted to, or were they restricted to hearing literature? The classic discussion of literacy is by William Harris, and though his work has been analyzed and qualified by many scholars, his basic conclusion has found a near consensus.[10] The majority of the population, whether during the period of the Greeks or Romans, was not literate to the extent that they could read literary works, and certainly not that they could write literature. Learning to read was a privilege of less than 10 percent of the population, with a somewhat higher percentage in urban areas and lower percentage in rural areas (see proposition 8 for more discussion). Thus, the

illiteracy of authors' intended audiences was a contributing factor to the orality of their textuality. We might think that authors had to remind themselves to write for hearers, but orality was so intuitive that it probably was natural for authors to incorporate orality into textuality.

Moving on to the Romans, as noted at the outset of this chapter, if Greek literature was the first generation of the literature of Western civilization, Latin literature was the second. In many respects, what has been said about the orality of Greek literature can be said about Roman literature. Elegiac Latin poetry, for example, had a long tradition of being transmitted orally. Oral features in written documents were common. Oral performance was everywhere, whether of purely oral or written literature. Virgil's *Aeneid*, the great Roman epic written in the first century B.C., though not a product of oral composers and performers sounds like it was, for Virgil trained himself to imitate Homer's formulas and poetry.[11]

In the introduction to his book on the *Aeneid*, B. G. Campbell notes that Latin literature "retained a massive residue of orality. In the Western world, this period of literacy extended for some two millennia, from the introduction of the phonetic alphabet in eighth century B.C. Greece until the invention of movable type and printing in the mid fifteenth century."[12]

During the last decade of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, classical scholars have focused attention on the prominence of orality across the Greek and Roman worlds and beyond. The nine volumes now in print of the series Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World represent the strength of recent scholarship.[13]

Conclusion

The question this chapter posed was to what extent Greco-Roman culture may have become text dominant, if not book dominant. Was the world of communicating and processing information in the early centuries of Western civilization significantly different from the ancient Near East? Our conclusion is that even with all the literary accomplishments of the Greeks and Romans, the cognitive environment—except perhaps for the authors themselves and others in highly educated circles—remained hearing dominant. Oral ways of thinking and communicating, which existed before literature was written, continued long after literature was inscribed.

Greek literature generally began in oral tradition, and after the rise of written

literature, features of orality continued to influence how people perceived and received literature. Textuality did not overshadow orality. It was a text-possible-yet-hearing-prevalent society, or as Walter Ong designates it, a "residually oral culture."[14] The shift from oral to written literature did not mean a total makeover in how people thought about the poetry and prose of their culture. In effect, textuality was a tool of orality.

We do not mean to downplay the significance of the shift from oral literature to written literature. It would eventually be a sea change sweeping across Europe and altering the shape of numerous cultures and literatures. But for most Greeks and Romans, what they knew of literature came to them orally rather than textually. People thought, spoke and generally communicated in terms of orality. And even though certain authors turned to preserving traditions in written form, orality still pervaded the written texts and dominated the communicative landscape.

Even in this brief overview of Greek and Roman literary production, we can already see things about a hearing-dominant culture that do not make complete sense to our text-dominant logic. We may be inclined to wonder,

- How could literature be composed in the mind without authors writing it down?
- How could written forms not replace oral forms (as if written forms are superior)?
- How could the texts of written forms be fluid like oral forms?
- How would people only hearing literature understand it differently from people reading it?
- How would an author write differently when intending it for oral performance?

Returning to where this chapter began and the question of whether we need the Greeks and the Romans, we will see going forward that the interplay of orality and textuality in the Greco-Roman world lays important groundwork for reorienting our thinking to the hearing-dominant culture of the New Testament. Our thesis is that we will not interpret the New Testament correctly if we fail to grasp the oral dimensions involved in its creation and transmission. The next chapter will explore in more detail the distinctive mindset associated with a hearing-dominant culture. So far we have primarily examined the facts of the

case. Next we need to investigate the implications.

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Proposition 6

Oral and Written Approaches to Literature Entail Significant Differences

The world consists of many cultures. Jane Goodall, with a PhD in ethology from Cambridge University, spent most of her life in the forests of Tanzania, Africa, studying the culture of chimpanzees. She needed to live with them to understand them. As *National Geographic* often demonstrates, the study of cultures of everything from the smallest forms of plant life to the largest animals can be fascinating and groundbreaking. Goodall's discovery of tool making by primates stands out.

Alongside the diverse cultures of the inhabitants of our planet, the differences among human cultures can be equally impressive. In order for people who are literate to understand those who are not, or in order for people who are text dominant to understand those who are hearing dominant, they need to enter into the contrasting cultures and discover their unique ways of processing information and ideas.

Not very long ago it was assumed that every home in America needed exhaustive amounts of information at their fingertips. So summer salespersons went door to door selling multivolume encyclopedias. All that changed with the arrival of the digital information age. Those expensive encyclopedias can now be found a dime a dozen at yard sales. And for today's college students, who were never greeted at the door by another college student selling encyclopedias, the culture of marketing encyclopedias door to door as a summer job seems to be from another planet.

Backing up to the first century, if someone had been told that two thousand years in the future there would be such a thing as books, that letters would be inscribed on pages by machine (what's a machine?), that hundreds of books could be produced per day, that there would be multivolume sets of books, that the average person on the street would be able to own books, that people would have enough education and leisure to read books, that people would go door to door selling books, and so on and so on, such an individual from the first century would be baffled. In effect, they would have to become a part of our culture to understand such strange things.

Only since the middle of the twentieth century has research uncovered how significant the differences can be among cultures of orality versus textuality. In contrast to the ancient world, not only are we in the West generally literate and textually oriented, but we are also under the spell of the printed word. As Neil Postman observes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, "Print put forward a definition of intelligence that gave priority to the objective, rational use of the mind and at the same time encouraged forms of public discourse with serious, logically ordered content."[1]

Without cross-cultural experience among non-literate people, it's difficult for Westerners to imagine an ancient society where literacy was not essential, where people could not refer to words on a page, where people were dependent on their ears rather than their eyes to embrace the history, literature and values that gave their community identity. It would probably require us to become part of that culture to understand such strange things.

This chapter focuses on the implications of orality. It builds on ideas introduced in propositions 1, 2 and 3. If orality prevailed in the ancient Near East and in the Greco-Roman world even when textuality was coming into its own, there must have been good reason. The challenge is for those of us in textual societies to understand the workings of oral societies. If we can figure this out, we'll understand better what we find in the New Testament when we investigate its orality.

Truths and Myths About Orality

Any act of communication is a production of culture. A person has a thought, decides to communicate that thought and takes action, in each case within the context of a specific culture. Theoretically, orality and textuality can be different modes of communication for accomplishing the same purpose. Whether oral or written—whether speaker or author—for the communicator, similar factors come into play:

- ability and privilege to communicate
- initiative and intention of the communication
- shared language and genre
- anticipated effect (cerebral, emotional)

For hearers or readers, the components are also equivalent:

- openness to receive the communication
- capability to understand the language of communication
- comprehension of content and intention
- response

More noteworthy, however, are the differences between orality and textuality. There is more to it than simply varying modes of communication. The cognitive environments differ dramatically. As noted in proposition 1, we need to adjust our thinking to the unique ways that information was disseminated and traditions transmitted in hearing-dominant societies vis-à-vis text-dominant societies.

Textual literature can be read in private; hearing oral literature generally occurs in communities. For oral communication, authority focuses on the persons who transmit the tradition. In written communication, authority shifts to the words on the page. Many aspects of oral cultures are counterintuitive to how we, living in a world of textuality, think.

Looking back across time, Eric Havelock notes that "the natural human being is not a writer or a reader but a speaker and a listener."[2] For millennia, societies thought, acted and reacted orally, and they adequately managed their affairs. They didn't know they needed to be able to read and write.

Fundamentally, speaking is primary; writing is derivative. So it is in the Bible: nothing in the biblical creation accounts suggests that God wrote or created writing. Speaking was the focus; writing would come later. So it is for children: learning to speak is essential and comes first; learning to write is helpful and comes second. So it has been in history: a society that does not speak to one another has never existed; a society that does not write to one another has always existed.

After the discovery of writing, whether for the Egyptians or Sumerians, the Greeks or Romans, it was often only the priestly or commercial elites that acquired enough literacy to carry out their duties (or they purchased slaves who had been trained to read and write on behalf of their masters). Beyond that, the wealthy may have been educated enough to be literate. For the general populace literacy was rare, for it was almost never a necessity. Remarkably, the Greeks—though having produced thousands of pages of great literature—continued many

of the practices of oral culture (see proposition 5).

Havelock goes on to urge Western educational systems to put more emphasis on “a curriculum of song, dance, and recitation and that it be accompanied by continual instruction in these oral arts. Good readers, we suggest, grow out of good speakers and reciters.”[3] Along those lines, a good case can be made for classical education that includes rhetoric.

In contrast to Havelock, some people in literate societies have associated orality with primitive society, whereas textuality is considered a billboard announcing the arrival of civilization. Some treat orality as if it were second rate and indicative of less complex thought processes, a rural phenomenon more suited to the life of small communities bound up in traditions. Textuality on the other hand is considered urban and the product of more sophisticated rationality, “a ‘royal road’ to enlightenment and modernity.”[4] John Miles Foley caricatures such pejorative thinking with the comment that “on one side stood the well organised and highly drilled forces of literacy and authored texts, on the other side the rag-tag guerilla bands of orality and the textless works of illiterate bards.”[5]

Recent scholars conclude that Walter Ong, a representative of an earlier generation, overanalyzed the impact of textuality on culture. He concluded that orality was community oriented, situational, empathetic and holistic, while textuality shaped Western culture so that it became analytical, abstract, objective and specific.[6] Along with Ong, a few modern critics—failing to appreciate the enduring value of orality—have concluded that a tsunami of cultural change occurred once textuality dawned. In their minds, textuality eventually gained the upper hand and triumphed, while orality was being overwhelmed and essentially disappeared. This is known as the literary hypothesis; today it’s almost considered a human right to be literate.[7]

But all these generalities obscure the complexities of oral-textual interactions and shifts. Simply put, it is never one or the other. As Anne Mackay notes, “Oral tradition continued to pervade potentially every form of cultural expression in the subsequent literate development of the society.”[8]

Contrary to the way those of us in literate societies are inclined to think, textuality is not the panacea of progress. Who knows whether in the future our forms of textuality will be superseded by some other means of communication that we cannot presently imagine. (Perhaps we are headed that way with the digital revolution.)

Comparing and Contrasting Orality and Textuality

Differences between oral culture and textual culture can be significant. In the oral communication of hearing-dominant societies, speakers hold the reins of communication: they determine when they speak and to whom; they determine whether what they say will be understandable. If hearers refuse to pay attention, or demonstrate that they fail to understand, it is up to the speaker to respond accordingly—otherwise communication will fail. Though there is a sense of shared responsibility between performer and audience, the burden of proof is on the speaker. In oral communication what is spoken is shaped in significant ways by what is heard.

In the written communication of text-dominant societies, hearers hold the reins: they choose whether to read, what, by whom and when; they may decide for themselves what an author meant. Although authors initiate the process by deciding what to write—and they write in ways they hope will be understood—they do not control whether hearers comprehend or respond appropriately. In this case, though a shared sense of responsibility is also present, the burden of proof shifts to the readers. Author and audience do not interact directly, so the author can only anticipate in advance how readers might respond. It is up to readers to uncover what authors intended. In written communication what an author writes is *not* shaped in significant ways by what is read.

There is one more scenario of communication to consider. The differences between oral and written communication become confusing in a text-possible-yet-hearing-prevalent society. As Werner Kelber notes, "Because the vast majority of people were habituated to the spoken word, much of what was written was meant to be recited and listened to."[9] When authors wrote knowing that the majority of their audience would be hearers, not readers, and that someone would perform what they were writing, they would write both with readers and hearers in mind (see Rev 1:3). They would be concerned with what would help the public reading to be effective and with what would help the written text to be understood orally. At this point the reader, who became also in part the performer, held the reins: the reader/performer influenced whether the author's intended meaning would be communicated effectively. If hearers refused to pay attention, or demonstrated that they failed to understand, it was up to the reader/performer to respond accordingly. In the process, the reader/performer became interpreter too. In written communication that was intended for oral communication, what an author wrote was shaped in significant ways for a public reading, and how a reader/performer presented the reading was

shaped in significant ways by how the written text could be understood best in an oral context.

If we wish to understand more of the differences between orality and textuality, we need to consider the following points. While much of this—if we stop and think about it—may seem obvious, for those who don't think about it, it's not obvious.[10]

1. Orality functions particularly well in communicating powerful messages to smaller groups of people.

    - People are present to one another, though levels of presence can vary according to physical distance and the size of an audience. Speaker and hearer are often in some kind of a relationship, and the communication may be intended to influence that relationship. A message delivered with passion can have significant emotive effect. Hearers tend to grasp the larger issues taken up in a communication.

    - With textuality, on the other hand, persona, inflection and body language are difficult if not impossible to communicate. Written forms have limited value in establishing relationships between author and recipients. The written word allows for considerable spatial distances between the person who authored it and those who receive it. Temporal distances are likely as well, and depending on the time lag between writing and receiving, understanding may be hindered. A written text can become stale, outdated, superseded, damaged or lost completely.

2. Textuality can communicate to a larger number of people over wider geographical areas and longer periods of time.

    - From the perspective of text-dominant culture, written texts seem to be more permanent and enduring. Although writing generally takes a greater amount of effort than speaking, the written word can reach a much larger audience. Readers can analyze a text carefully, comparing and contrasting various points. They may

reread it.

- Also, in the view of people under the influence of written culture, orality may seem to be focused only on the moment, for words may seem to evaporate as fast as they are formed. Verbal events, with all their attendant circumstances, are not repeatable, it is assumed. Unless speakers cement in their minds in advance exactly what they intend to say, they will not likely remember precisely what they said. Hearers will rarely remember exactly what was communicated—especially for longer discourses—although if they hear something repeatedly, they may retain it. Since speech is linear, neither speakers nor hearers can move forward or backward in a communication. If listeners wish to withdraw in the middle of a speech in order to think on their own about something they have heard, they cannot push the pause button and return at will to pick up where they left off. Unless speeches are short or have long pauses, hearers tend not to meditate on specific thoughts or expressions.

3. Using Western logic, it makes sense for oral communication to be the medium in certain circumstances.

    - If someone has a message that is difficult to explain, that entails emotions, that depends on a relationship or is intended to enhance a relationship, that may be easily misunderstood, that may require explanation and dialogue, that will be better received if the hearer is in a particular frame of mind, that a delay in receiving may disadvantage, or that will be better understood if the author's persona, body language and inflection can be experienced, an oral form of the message will be beneficial.

    - We consider orality to be especially preferred in three forms: speeches, lectures and sermons. Generally, we do not consider those oral forms to be literature even if they are written out word for word and then read aloud.

4. On the other hand—but also using Western logic—written communication will make better sense in certain circumstances:

- When an author cannot be present to hearers, either spatially or temporally;
- When an author wants his communication to have very specific wording;
- When an author wants readers to be able to refer back to a communication or to read it on more than one occasion;
- When an author hopes readers will meditate on specific concepts and wording;
- When an author hopes readers will preserve the message and/or transmit it to others.

Unfortunately points 1 through 4 above, along with the subpoints, do not do justice to the cognitive environment of oral culture. Though a step in the right direction for understanding the differences between orality and textuality, the logic is too Western. Most of the ideas need to be qualified to be fair to ways people think in hearing-dominant societies. None of the statements are entirely wrong, but there is more to say from the standpoint of oral culture.

At this point, we as authors are admitting our limitations. It's symptomatic of radically different cultures seeking to understand each other: to gain full comprehension of communication through the lens of orality, we would probably need to live in such a culture for an extended period of time.

Mission work of the last couple of decades has become increasingly aware of the need to speak the language of orality. Books such as *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* address the necessity of "storying" to communicate the gospel in other cultures.[11] Oral cultures house their central convictions in fundamental narratives that are repeated over and over again. And those oral traditions become no less permanent than if they were inscribed on written texts. Even people who have learned to read and write depend on orality as the means to learn, to communicate and to be entertained. So to introduce the gospel into oral cultures, stories need to be told that offer alternative pictures of reality. It entails developing storytelling dramas and gaining ability in memorization and recitation.

Returning to the hearing-dominant culture of the ancient world, it's at least clear that orality was valued over textuality in many cases. Though it seems

illogical to us, the ancients considered oral texts to be adequate means of composing and communicating literature, including acts of preserving and interpreting. Even for those who had the ability to write, oral communication could be preferred. As noted in propositions 1 and 5, literacy is not necessarily absent in hearing-dominant societies, but is simply nonessential; nor are written forms thought of as something independent of, different from or better than oral texts.

While it's not easy for moderns to understand ancient orality, at the same time, if ancient oral cultures could have foreseen that modern people immersed in text-dominant cultures would accept the limitations of textual modes of communication and use written texts anyway, that would have seemed inconceivable to them. The challenge of this study is to do what's necessary to understand ancient orality.

Conclusion

Proposition 5 demonstrated that orality was prominent in the ancient world even after the invention of writing. For those of us in text-dominant societies, that may not make sense, but perhaps we are able to accept it anyway. But the full implications of orality are more challenging to appreciate. Rather than simply acknowledging the enduring qualities of orality, we need to understand how the cognitive environment of ancient orality was unique.

In response to the question, Do people in a world of written texts perceive communication differently from those in a culture of oral texts?, the answer is inarguably yes. The differences between orality and textuality are significant. For a person in a text-dominant culture trying to understand a hearing-dominant one, it can appear that the other is from a different planet. And vice versa. The cultures of text dominant and hearing dominant can be counterintuitive to each other. "In antiquity, the most literate cultures remained committed to the spoken word to a degree which appears to our more visually organized sensibilities somewhat incredible or even perverse."[12]

While this chapter has offered an explanation of some of the differences between orality and textuality, it will require more investigation to comprehend what it meant for the ancient world and the New Testament to be hearing dominant. To help us have a better understanding of how orality functioned in non-literate societies, the next chapter will explore three case studies of ancient

orality. This is all leading up to the literary production of the New Testament and the significance of Jesus' communicating only orally.

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Proposition 7

Greek Historians, Philosophers and Jewish Rabbis Offer Instructive Examples of Ancient Oral Culture

If someone living at the time of the New Testament were to have a conversation with someone living in the Western world in the twenty-first century, we might wonder how much they would have in common to talk about. There would be significant differences in agriculture and diet, work and economy, cities and home life, trade and travel, warfare and medicine, politics and religion, and so forth. More to the point, the intellectual differences in language and literature, math and science, education and philosophy would be even more profound.

As our previous propositions have emphasized, we in modern Western society think in terms of written literature; at the time of the New Testament oral literature was common. We read books; they listened to literary performances. We read the news or watch it on television; they received the news aurally. We have written records for just about everything; they were more dependent on memory and oral reports.

This uniqueness of the ancient world can be demonstrated in many ways, and we would do well to examine all those ways. Even the notion of oral literature sounds odd in our ears. But for the purposes of this chapter we will confine ourselves to three case studies: historians, philosophers and rabbis. We asserted in proposition 5 that the introduction of written texts into the hearing-dominant culture of the Greeks and Romans did not eliminate significant oral dimensions. Then in proposition 6 we turned our focus to orality in particular, seeking to understand how alien an ancient hearing-dominant society can be to our ways of thinking.

Now in this chapter we take a closer look at what happens when oral culture and textual culture are involved in communicating to a society that was largely hearing dominant. We will discover ways that orality continued to serve society well, even when it was possible to put things in writing. This interplay of orality and textuality provides important background to the New Testament, for as we will see going forward, modern interpreters easily miss the significance of the oral dimensions in Scripture. We must not fall into the trap of thinking about the

New Testament in terms of our modern, text-dominant culture.

The Production of History in an Oral Culture

The writing of history in the Greco-Roman world opens a window into ancient literary production. Of the historians across the centuries who revealed various techniques of their trade, there are many who could be investigated: Herodotus and Thucydides (fifth century B.C.), Julius Caesar and Livy (first century B.C.), Tacitus and Suetonius (second century A.D.), and so forth.[1] Our focus, however, is Herodotus and Thucydides, because these were the most formative historians.

Although Hecataeus stands out as an early writer of historical prose (about 500 B.C.), it was the victory over the Persians in the fifth century that propelled the Greeks' interest in history. The defeat of the Persians at Marathon in 490 B.C., for example, was legendary. In his *Histories* Herodotus (480–425 B.C.) explored the differences between the Greeks and the barbarians (i.e., anyone who didn't speak Greek). His objective was to understand the background of the Persian Wars and to narrate clearly what happened in the wars. Herodotus was a master storyteller in the tradition of oral performers, but he was also the first real historian of the Greco-Roman world. He took a fledgling genre to a whole new level.

The sources that Herodotus had at his disposal were almost entirely oral. It's estimated that 80 percent of his information came to him orally.[2] If he used any written sources, he did not report it. To collect information he traveled widely in the Mediterranean world (or so he claimed), inquiring about local and national traditions. His historical method was more than random curiosity, but not quite systematic inquiry.[3] He collected as much information as possible about many different places and peoples—often more than he could use—and then weighed the relative merits of the oral material for the purposes of his history. As he wrote he sometimes stated the sources of his information and expressed his opinion about the veracity of what he had been told. His priority was to separate the probable from the improbable, to rescue truth from tradition and to report faithfully what he found to be correct. This was an early form of critical inquiry, and distinguishing fact from fiction was important.

It's also true that Herodotus recognized the limitations of oral sources. They could be biased, fragmentary and even contradictory. Often he could not determine the precise facts or details of particular events. He accepted that

reality, knowing that telling a good story mattered the most anyway. That is to say, he composed his *Histories*—which he may have delivered first in oral forms as a traveling lecturer—with the controlling factor in mind of what would appeal to audiences who would hear his history. It had to be believable more than it had to be provable.

Yet as Roy Hyde notes, Herodotus "was not a naïve storyteller."[4] He was a fair-minded historian, operating within the oral and written traditions of his time. Three centuries later Cicero credited Herodotus with being the "father of history," even while recognizing that some of Herodotus's material was based on legends (Cicero, *Laws* 1.5).

Following in the footsteps of Herodotus, Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian Wars between Athens and Sparta of which he was a contemporary himself. He was fortunate to witness personally some of the events he described. This gave him an advantage. In comparison to Herodotus, who wrote about events and people in the past, Thucydides had firsthand information. But the result was something less than Herodotus. Thucydides ignored the past and focused only on the present; he was more social scientist than historian.

Recounting contemporary history allowed Thucydides to become a pioneer in reporting events with accuracy, searching for specific details and describing them carefully. The ultimate objective for Thucydides, however, was utilitarian: he sought to analyze what happened in the wars, looking for lessons so that history need not repeat itself.

But since Thucydides was composing history to be heard by people present at some of the events he narrated, it was necessary that he be precise with chronology, that he double check his sources and that he avoid bias. But he was not entirely successful. As Hyde remarks, "Thucydides' objectivity used to be proverbial. More recently, without necessarily impugning his honesty, scholars have taken to scrutinizing more closely ways in which he—perhaps unintentionally—shapes our perception of events."[5]

Thucydides can also be faulted for selecting certain events to include and deselecting others. In some of his history the selection seems lopsided without any rational explanation. Perhaps it was the limitation of his sources or his own personal preferences. "But very often Thucydides' exclusions transcend the limits of the permissible by any definition of history that the modern world would recognize."[6]

Although Thucydides was a contemporary of what he described, like

Herodotus he too was at the mercy of oral sources. Michael Grant notes that whether Herodotus, Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Sallust or any ancient historian, their literary production was largely dependent on oral sources.[7] Much of what Thucydides reported was based on eyewitness accounts, and as he admitted they were not always reliable.

> I deemed it worthy to write about the deeds that occurred during the events in the war, but not based on things learned in chance encounters with an informant, nor based on what seemed likely to me. . . . I struggled to determine what really happened, because those present did not report the same things for each of the deeds, either because they favored one side or the other, or because their memories were lacking. (*The History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22.2-3)[8]

Surprisingly, when Thucydides had written sources available he bypassed them because they seemed to him to be unreliable. In his opinion they were tainted because they had been written to catch the attention of readers.

Thucydides is especially well known for admitting that he used historical imagination in reconstructing speeches and placing them in the mouths of statesmen and generals. One-quarter of his history consists of speeches that he crafted. He describes the matter this way:

> As to the speeches different ones gave—either before or during the war—it was difficult to keep in memory the things spoken, whether I heard them myself or they were reported to me by others. So it seemed right to me that each of the speakers should say things most appropriate for the occasions, maintaining as much as possible the sense of what was actually spoken. (*The History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22.1)

An examination of the Greek text shows that each of the speeches was written in typical Thucydidean style. Because Thucydides had no qualms about making the speeches say what he thought they should, it allowed him to use the re-created speeches to advance his narrative. Though some ancient historians were faulted by their successors for passing along incorrect information, apparently the speeches of Thucydides escaped charges of inaccuracies.[9]

In summary, Grant comments that if we were to judge the histories of the Greeks and Romans by modern standards of historiography, we would conclude that they were a mix of information and misinformation.[10] But that would be an

unfair assessment. Given the limitations of sources and the expectations of their audiences, the histories served ancient societies well. Otherwise they would not have been passed down and preserved.

Teaching Philosophy in an Oral Culture

Greek philosophy had its roots in cosmology and speculations about the ultimate causes of the universe. Did the universe originate from a single, uncreated and imperishable substance? Was water the prime element? Maybe fire? Did a specific structure of an unlimited number of atoms form the basis of the universe? Was intelligence a force distinct from matter? In the fourth century B.C. Socrates and Plato left such speculation behind and turned the attention of philosophers to the study of humans and their relations. Morality replaced cosmology. Now the questions were related to knowledge, virtue, justice, courage, emotions, happiness and inductive reasoning.

Philosophers did not speak only to themselves about their investigations but were constantly training disciples. Plato's Academy, founded early in the fourth century, continued in existence for eight hundred years as Plato's successors continued to teach various forms of his philosophy. Aristotle established his school at the Lyceum in Athens, where he lectured and wrote. Epicurus (third century B.C.) also established a school in Athens. Students came from around the Mediterranean to study with the great philosophers.

The commitment to train students in philosophical reasoning is evident in how philosophers put their ideas in writing. Plato is a case in point. All but two of his twenty-seven writings were dialogues. The dialogues featured dramatic argumentation with hypothetical participants discussing philosophical issues. Socrates, Plato's teacher—though he wrote nothing—is the principal speaker in most of Plato's dialogues, representing a combination of what Socrates taught and ways that Plato developed those ideas.

In his dialogue known as the *Phaedrus* (named after a character in the dialogue), Plato put in the mouth of Socrates an account of a god in Egypt inventing letters. When the god presented the invention to the king of Egypt, claiming that it would make the Egyptians wiser, the king replied that just the opposite was the case:

> For those who learn to use this invention it will result in forgetfulness,

> for they will no longer need to use their memory. . . . You have discovered a medication not to increase memory but to increase dependence on being reminded. Thus you offer to your students only the appearance of wisdom not true wisdom. For they will read much, but not be taught; they will appear to be knowledgeable, but on the whole they will be ignorant. (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275a; see also p. 20 for a quote from Plato's *Phaedrus*)

As the dialogue continues, Socrates repeatedly points out the flaws of encoding philosophy in written form.

- Words put in writing are incapable of being clear and are only useful to remind someone of what they have heard (275 c).
- Written words are only an image of living and breathing words (276 a).
- Written words cannot be defended by argument and cannot teach truth effectively (276 c).
- The best way to teach philosophy is by means of the dialectic method through which ideas can be implanted in minds that may then sprout and produce new ideas, which can be passed on to others (276 e–277 a).
- If an author thinks that what he has written has certainty and clarity, it is to his disgrace (277 d).
- Written words do not provide opportunity for questioning and teaching (277 e).
- Written words are of little value unless an author is able to back them up by explanation (278 d).

It is unexpected that in philosophers' commitment to training students written forms were not considered suitable for philosophical thought.[11] The philosophers identified several additional disadvantages. Textuality provided no means for relationship or discussion between teachers and students. Reading skills varied, so written forms could not be trusted to communicate philosophy according to the varying levels of students' needs. Learning philosophy through books meant there was no accountability; a teacher could not know how his students were doing and whether they had learned how to engage in meaningful philosophical inquiry. Furthermore, reading a book might lead someone to think they had learned a body of material, but for them only to repeat what was written

in a book was an illusion of knowledge.

Philosophers were also concerned that writing could lead to intellectual laziness. They thought failing to memorize was failing to learn. Students might ask, Why memorize when it's here in the book? So books were thought to have the disadvantage of allowing students to slack off in memorization. Students might also neglect the necessary step of applying philosophy to real-life situations, which is something philosophers would insist on in face-to-face discussions. Furthermore, writing created the potential for ethical dilemmas; if a teacher was not engaged directly with students, he would not be accountable to them and could misrepresent the truth in his writing. A philosopher might contradict himself, which could more readily be corrected in an oral setting but would be preserved forever in written form. Even worse, authors could falsely present themselves as philosophers and mislead readers.

In general, philosophers concluded that writing was limited as a means of conveying knowledge. Orality was preferred. It is not surprising then that philosophers like Socrates and the Stoic Epictetus (second century A.D.) wrote nothing; we only know what they communicated through what their students recorded. This preference for orality among many philosophers continued into the Roman period, as evident particularly with the sophists.

But all this leads to an obvious question: why did any philosopher write anything if they were so averse to textuality? The answer is not entirely clear, but the ways they wrote are part of the answer. They sought to re-create in written form how a philosopher would lead students into philosophical discussions. This resulted in the common dialogue and symposium forms of philosophical essays. Philosophers wanted the reading and hearing of their written texts to be done in community so that discussion would follow naturally among the hearers. They thought that members of groups would help each other come to correct understandings. They recognized that not everyone would be a good reader, so they encouraged careful selection of readers.

Thus, insofar as possible, philosophers sought to keep orality dominant even in the presence of textuality (maybe a form of job security?). Their writings were themselves a form of performance. They hoped that their oral-shaped texts would result in oral-shaped learning, which involved fellow learners discussing and coming to agreement on the meaning and application of what the philosophers said. If writing and reading were done the right way, perhaps philosophy could be learned without a philosopher personally present. In summary, in the case of philosophers, their ancient literary production was

strongly influenced by orality.

The Rabbis and Oral Teachings

The term *rabbi* (etymologically, "my great one") was used in Palestine beginning in the first century A.D. for a teacher (see Jn 1:38; 20:16). But the term could also refer to religious figures in high position, not exclusively teachers. Among the sects of the first century, the rabbis were most like the Pharisees, though there was no direct link. Later, in the third century and following, the term *rabbi* denoted an individual who had achieved status and power within the societies that produced rabbinic literature.[12]

The rabbis were considered the epitome of wisdom, and for that reason they are often referred to today as sages. Evidence from the first century suggests that rabbis did not teach in formal educational settings but in disciple circles. Their delivery system was entirely oral. As William Green says, it was "a world of face-to-face relationships."[13]

Rabbis typically taught more by modeling how to live than by instructing what to do. If they had been English speakers, the rabbis' most common expression might have been, "This is what one does," but rarely would they have said, "Do this" or "Don't do that." What the rabbis did was highly regarded and could attain the status of law, as if the actions of a few legislated the actions of many. Jesus' warning about the Pharisees, while confirming the validity of what they taught, exposed the hypocrisy of what they practiced:

> Pay attention to what they tell you and do it. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy loads, hard to carry, and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing even to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by people, for they make their phylacteries wide and their tassels long. They love the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues and elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and to have people call them "Rabbi." (Mt 23:3-7 NET)

The rabbis were passionate guardians of Old Testament Law, otherwise known as the Torah, for they believed that God directly gave Moses his perfect word (the Pentateuch). As for the rest of the books of the Old Testament, they were inspired too, except they did not add anything essential to the Torah.[14]

But the Torah of the rabbis had another dimension. Beyond what was written in the books of the Law, they believed there was an oral body of authoritative tradition, key portions of which existed since the time of Moses. In effect, the rabbis had a two-part Torah. The oral Torah consisted of expansions and explanations of the written Torah, not because the written form was at fault but because rules fixed in writing could not address every possible issue that might arise in ensuing time periods. As Hyam Maccoby makes clear,

> It was thought that the *nucleus* of the Oral Torah was given to Moses by God, and was therefore of equal authority to the Written Torah itself. This nucleus consisted of traditions of great antiquity . . . but these traditions formed only a small proportion of the Oral Torah. The bulk of the Oral Torah was of lesser authority, being attributed to the enactment or decision of figures of the post-Mosaic period. . . . The Oral Torah was a living, growing body of law and lore, responding to the changing circumstances and becoming more comprehensive in scope as the unfolding of time posed new questions.[15]

The close connection of the rabbis to Old Testament Law, both as interpreters of how it should be applied and models of putting its provisions into practice, meant—according to Jacob Neusner—that the Torah was effectively "incarnated" in the rabbis. He notes that "what a sage said became part of the oral component of the one whole Torah God gave to Moses at Sinai."[16] Neusner provides a quote from rabbinic literature in support of this concept: "He who sees a disciple of a sage who has died is as if he sees a scroll of the Torah that has been burned."[17]

One of the unexpected things about the rabbis of first-century Palestine, which is especially important for this chapter, is that they apparently wrote nothing. It was sufficient in their thinking to have the written form of the Torah and to let the oral texts remain oral. As Shmuel Safrai states, "the teachings of the Sages, according to their own statements, were created and transmitted orally."[18] Even with their prominent role of teaching and modeling how to live in light of the law, it was enough to communicate that orally. Not until almost two hundred years after the time of Jesus did the rabbis begin to inscribe their wisdom in written form. Paradoxically, rabbinic literature records prohibitions against writing: teaching and preaching were supposed to remain "oral literary activities."[19] And the rabbis felt free, when recording previous traditions in

writing, to adapt them for their own purposes.[20]

Considering the literature of the rabbis—though it is from a period later than the New Testament—the evidence of oral origins is obvious. The style of rabbinic literature was largely a compilation of viewpoints of various rabbis, often one in response to another, sometimes in contradiction to another. It reads like rabbis taught: "This is what one does," though in this case it was a collection of multiple rabbis expressing their opinions about what one does. As Maccoby states, the Oral Torah,

> even when put into writing, remained a record of oral discussions going on among multiple personalities. . . . In a rabbinic work, each contribution quoted comes originally from an oral context . . . and even if there are intermediate written sources, none of these sources has lost its oral atmosphere or its character as a record of oral discussions.[21]

All this leads to an important question: Was Jesus a rabbi? According to the Gospel of John, the disciples commonly addressed Jesus as rabbi, as did Nicodemus and Mary.[22] Conversely, none of Jesus' adversaries called him rabbi, probably because it would have accorded him too much respect (see Mt 23:7-8). Luke, apparently writing for Gentiles, did not include the term.

It made perfect sense to think of Jesus as a rabbi, though that did not mean he fit the mold in every way. The similarities are remarkable:

- Jesus taught but not in formal educational settings.
- Jesus' delivery system was face to face and oral.
- Jesus modeled how to live as much or more than he stated, "Do this" or "Don't do that."
- Jesus' teachings were created orally and transmitted orally.
- Jesus was a passionate guardian of Old Testament law.
- Jesus explained and expanded on Old Testament law.
- Jesus' actions could attain the status of commandments in the minds of his followers.
- God's truth was incarnate in Jesus.
- Jesus wrote nothing; it was sufficient for his oral texts to remain oral.

- The oral origins of the Gospels are evident within the Gospels.
- It was not until approximately twenty years after Jesus' public ministry that the first written accounts of his words and deeds were inscribed in the Gospels.[23]

Conclusion

In the cases explored in this chapter, we have observed three examples of the interplay of orality and textuality. For ancient historians, their work could hardly have proceeded without dependence on oral sources. Yet the variations they found among their oral sources, even from eyewitnesses, created problems for accurate reporting. They were forced to make judgment calls. And the absence of detailed records, such as for the content and wording of speeches, meant they had to reconstruct some parts of their histories. Further, hearers probably did not even think about the notion that reconstructed speeches might impinge on accomplishing the purposes of writing history.

Regarding philosophers, the issue was whether philosophy, which was typically taught in small settings with few students, could be taught via written texts (an early form of "distance ed."?). Orality was obviously preferred, and Plato, for example, declared that written texts wouldn't work. Yet in the end, all but two of the prominent philosophers committed their thoughts to writing. Plato in particular sought to preserve much of the oral spirit of teaching philosophy by the way he composed his dialogues and symposiums.

The rabbis lived in a culture with high views of written and oral texts. While they affirmed the importance of the written text of the Old Testament Law, they saw no urgency to encode their oral texts in written form. Jesus remarkably fit the pattern of the rabbis.

These three case studies are each unique, but they have this in common: orality preceded textuality and was either preferred over textuality or left a lasting mark on textuality. We will find this to be true in the New Testament as well. As with historians, oral sources could be the basis of written forms. As with philosophers, orality was preferred for teaching complex subjects. And as with rabbis, it was unnecessary to encode oral texts in writing.

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Proposition 8

Jesus' World Was Predominantly Non-Literate and Oral

Jesus, the Middle Eastern storyteller—quoting the title of Gary Burge's book[1]—traveled from village to village preaching sermons and telling mind-bending stories. Actually, according to the Gospels, Jesus preached few sermons yet told frequent stories. (Maybe Christians should learn a lesson.) Reading Mark's Gospel in particular is like watching a fast-moving train, with miracles and parables hitched together as close as railroad cars. While Luke's Gospel records more of Jesus' parables than Matthew or Mark, John's Gospel does not have any.

Many things about Jesus' years on earth are counterintuitive to what Christians today expect of a proper Messiah/King—from his birth in an inconspicuous and unpretentious livestock enclosure (a cave, according to some ancient sources), to a very public yet merciless death associating him with criminals. Equally remarkable, Jesus' announcements of the advent of God's kingdom—a new order and society—were not primetime speeches. It seems that Jesus quietly moved around Palestine, often in rural areas, and generally told stories.

Many Christians have a tendency to overidealize Jesus' uniqueness and to overisolate him from his Jewishness. But Jesus lived in a storytelling world, so he did what communicated effectively to his immediate hearers: he spoke in word pictures, dramatic actions, metaphors and stories.[2] Along with being a Middle Eastern storyteller, Jesus was also a metaphorical theologian.[3]

While most of Jesus' stories were ones he made up to get a point across, they were not fabrications presented as factual.[4] In the ancient world his hearers would have intuitively recognized the nature of his illustrative stories. Jesus' parables were the product of creativity for the purpose of communicating unexpected theological concepts.

Nor should we think of Jesus' style of communication as second rate or shallow. He was not a country boy spinning tales to the delight of barbershop friends. Jesus' communication was truth-telling at the highest level. While anyone could appreciate Jesus' stories and stand in awe of the authority with which he spoke (Mk 1:27), the most educated and intelligent in the audience

could ponder Jesus' parables for a long time and still never probe their depths. The Pharisees and Sadducees often felt the sting of Jesus' stories but went away sputtering because they couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't sound stupid.

A major emphasis of the *Ancient Faith, Ancient Context* series in which Burge's book appears is how different the world of the twenty-first century is from that of the first. In order to backpedal through previous civilizations to the world of the first century, we need books like the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* and the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*.[5] Otherwise we may miss the real punch lines of Jesus' parables and the meaning of much of Scripture.[6]

The point of this chapter is similar to Burge's. If Jesus was a Middle Eastern storyteller and if literacy in first-century Palestine was not at levels we're familiar with, then some aspects of Scripture may be counterintuitive to our ways of thinking.

Were Most People Living in First-Century Palestine Literate?

We will inquire about Jesus' own literacy later in this chapter, but we begin with the general populace of Palestine. Was literacy common? Would Jesus' hearers have been able to read something had he written it? Did the majority receive official education? Or was literacy rare and was knowledge primarily gained orally? If knowledge was gained orally, how would that have differed from book knowledge? Was the world Jesus lived in hearing dominant rather than text dominant? Though the evidence to answer these questions is scant and subject to debate, we can draw some basic conclusions.[7]

The classic work on ancient literacy by William Harris argued for minimal literacy across the Roman Empire, in part because publicly funded education for children was nonexistent in the ancient world.[8] He observed that a population of poor people has never been able to afford private education for children, and with only what families can provide most children become adults without achieving levels of literacy that are the norm in modern societies. By way of contrast, for those in antiquity who had sufficient wealth, one of the benefits was free time and resources to provide education. When a family could afford educated slaves they were in a particularly advantageous position, for often these slaves became teachers.

Against this assessment of low literacy rates—often cited as ten percent at best—scholars appeal to sources like the first-century Jewish author Josephus who claimed that Jews provided education for their children.[9] But the tendency of Josephus to paint an overly positive picture of the Jews, especially since he was writing an apology for the elites of Rome, is well known. So research continues into other forms of evidence.[10]

Within the New Testament we read about people who had some degree of literacy. The priest Zechariah, for example, wrote on a wax tablet eight days after he became a father in order to communicate that his new son was to be named John (Lk 1:59-63). We may assume that Zechariah's training to become a priest included reading and writing, though how advanced that was—when all we know is that he could write a name—is uncertain. Whatever the case, the focus of Luke's account was not Zechariah's writing skills but God's special act of mercy for this remarkably faithful but barren family.

In contrast to the evidence for Zechariah's literacy, the Gospel of John reports that Pharisees—assuming their own literacy—claimed that people in general did not know the law (Jn 7:49). In response to some in the crowd who believed Jesus' message, the Pharisees declared that none of the rulers of the Jews or Pharisees believed in Jesus, and if the crowds believed, that was understandable because they were ignorant. "Curse be on them," the Pharisees said. The inference was that the masses were incapable of knowing the law for themselves, presumably because they were uneducated and non-literate.

Also implying that most people were non-literate, Jesus throughout his public ministry generally spoke as if his audience were hearing dependent. When he cited verses from the Old Testament, his standard formula was, "You have heard that it was said . . ." (for example, this appears six times in Matthew's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount). Only when Jesus addressed the elite, such as the Pharisees, chief priests, scribes and Sadducees, did he say, "Have you not read . . . ?"[11]

The evidence we have from the New Testament, then, supports the hypothesis that the majority of people in Jesus' audiences were non-literate. They had not received sufficient education to be able to read and write at a meaningful level. "Throughout antiquity writing was in the hands of an élite of trained specialists, and reading required an advanced education available only to a few."[12] That the inhabitants of Jerusalem understood the point of the inscription Pilate placed on Jesus' cross in three languages does not require that they were sufficiently literate to read literary texts (Jn 19:19-20).

Levels of Literacy and Textuality

Any discussion of ancient literacy must take into account varying degrees of ability to read and write. It was not a simple either-or matter. For young children today, one of the first things they learn to write is their name, maybe even before learning to read. For many people in the ancient world signature literacy was as much as they achieved, and in many cases it was sufficient. Beyond that, levels of reading and writing varied widely, culminating in scribal literacy and the ability to make copies of texts and compose written works.

Today, in the process of learning to read children may need to sound out very slowly the syllables of even simple words. And they will likely make mistakes, such as thinking the sign said “David Highway” when it was actually “Divided Highway.” In the ancient world, there are records of people who were only able to read very slowly. In most cases, their literacy was not advanced enough to read literary texts, or at least their readings would have been subject to misunderstanding.

All the gradations of literacy among children in our schools as they learn to read and write were present in antiquity. For most students today, the level they achieve in preschool or kindergarten is only a stage in an ongoing learning process. But in the ancient world, a primitive stage of literacy was often the final stage. And achieving a level of proficiency in reading did not result in a corresponding ability to write. The notion common in highly educated societies that education generally equips students to make progress in literacy—from being barely able to sound out a few simple words or to copy down a short phrase in awkwardly shaped letters, all the way to reading Shakespeare or writing in calligraphy—was inconceivable in first-century Palestine. The educational infrastructure was simply not developed as we have come to assume in Western society. And the challenges in first-century Palestine of speaking multiple languages and learning to read and write in more than one tended to overwhelm the potential for acquiring literacy.

A lack of literacy, however, does not equate with a lack of textuality. Jewish identity was formed and informed by texts transmitted and created by their communities. The Torah was fundamental to everything Jewish, and Jews were well aware of the power of texts over their lives. They regularly gathered in synagogues to hear the Torah read and to discuss it. In addition, the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures and the wealth of literature composed by Jews since the time of Malachi were well known.

The Dead Sea Scrolls stand out as evidence of the prominent role textuality

could have in Jewish consciousness in the first century. The Qumran community had a library of nearly nine hundred scrolls, of which about one-quarter were portions of the Old Testament. Most of the rest were their own compositions related in one way or another to the Scriptures. All these texts helped to preserve the traditions and values of the forefathers of the Jewish nation, especially in response to threats of acculturation to the ways and wiles of Roman society. The prominence of textuality in the life of the community is especially evident in this enjoinder:

> Anywhere where there are ten people, let there not be lacking a man expounding the Torah day and night, continuously, concerning the right conduct of a man with his fellow. And let the [Assembly of the] Many see to it that in the community a third of every night of the year [is spent] in reading the Book and expounding the Law and offering blessings together. (1QS 6:6-8)[13]

Even with textuality deep in the consciousness of first-century Palestine, for most people it was secondhand. Their level of textuality was limited because they perceived texts through the lens of orality. They were dependent on educated readers and religious interpreters. They heard the texts and valued what the texts said, but they did not have firsthand acquaintance with them. Their knowledge was based less on written text, and more on the authority that delivered the text to them.

Perhaps the oral hearers of antiquity were like preschool children today. Children hear stories read but cannot read them themselves. They presume their parents are reading the words on the page, but they cannot be sure—if it even matters. Their focus is on what they hear, on who they are hearing from and maybe even more on the pictures and graphics that accompany the stories. That may be an inept analogy, but it may help to underscore the differences between a culture that is hearing dominant and one that is reading dominant.

Was Jesus Literate?

Perhaps this seems like an unnecessary question. Of course Jesus was literate. But if he was, then at what level? Some scholars argue that Jesus was not literate at all.[14] For others, a high Christology requires that Jesus be the most literate of all. So what is the evidence? This is not the place for a full discussion of

everything involved in assessing Jesus' literacy, but we will examine various aspects of the question. For a thorough discussion see Chris Keith, *Jesus' Literacy*.[15]

To properly consider the potential for Jesus' literacy we need to return to the gradations of literacy in the first century. On the spectrum between being literate and non-literate, scribal literacy was toward the high end.[16] Only the most educated achieved the advanced form of literacy that qualified them to be scribes. To make an accurate copy of an intricate literary text, the ability to write evenly and neatly shaped letters required years of training. But scribes were required to have more than good eyesight, dexterity and perseverance. They needed to be well educated in the subjects of the manuscripts they were copying. So beyond being professional copyists, Jewish scribes were expected to be able to read the Torah publicly in synagogues. They were expected to serve as interpreters of texts, guiding the community in understanding and applying the Law. Scribes are mentioned in the New Testament as some of the Jewish religious leaders who interrogated Jesus about his teachings.

An even higher form of literacy was compositional literacy. To be able to form thoughts into proper constructions in Greek (or whatever language), and to inscribe the words on papyrus required an advanced level of familiarity with the language. Language learners today recognize that being able to speak another language fluently may not equip one to compose thoughts in proper written form.

The highest form of literacy was composing literature. This presumed the ability to engage with the most advanced forms of literature in the ancient world, to learn from them and to compose one's own literary works in written form. A very small number of people were able to compose documents such as private letters. An even smaller number were able to write literature.

In regard to Jesus, there are four main possibilities for his level of literacy.

- If he was literate in any way—being an uneducated craftsman—it would have been at a very low level.
- Jesus possessed scribal literacy; he could read the Torah in the synagogues, could freely cite Old Testament Scriptures and functioned as a religious authority.
- Jesus was skilled as a professional scribe; he could produce perfectly copied manuscripts.

- Jesus possessed compositional literacy; he was skilled in expressing his thoughts in written form and in creating literary works.

Regarding the first possibility, the common conception that Jesus was raised in a poor family supported only by Joseph's woodworking skills leads to the conclusion that the family would not have had resources to provide education for their sons.[17] But exactly what the family business was is uncertain. The Greek term used for Joseph's trade is *tektōn*. The word designated a craftsman or a builder, especially in the use of wood or stone, but anything more specific than that is conjecture. The term does not denote a high social status, but neither does it imply poverty. If the family provided sufficient resources for Jesus and his brothers to receive a thorough education, that would have been the exception rather than the norm among people of similar status. But saying *if the family did* and acknowledging *that would have been an exception* doesn't move the discussion very far along. Without more information, we are on shaky ground arguing that Jesus was non-literate based on a presumed social or economic class.

The better evidence for Jesus' level of literacy and education comes from the Gospels. Note the following statements and questions.

> They were amazed at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes. (Mk 1:22)[18]
>
> Since it was the Sabbath, Jesus began teaching in the synagogue, and many who heard were astounded saying, "From where did these things come to this one, and what is the wisdom that was given to this one, and what are these miracles that are accomplished through his hands? Is not this the craftsman?" (Mk 6:2-3; see also Mt 13:54-55)
>
> Jesus came to Nazareth where he was raised and entered into the synagogue on the Sabbath according to his custom. He stood up to read aloud, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, and unrolling the scroll he found the place where it was written . . . and they were amazed at the words of grace that came from his mouth and asked, "Is this not Joseph's son?" (Lk 4:16-22)
>
> How does this man know so much since he was not educated? (Jn 7:15)

These verses suggest that Jesus possessed scribal literacy. He was able to

read from a scroll and expound on it; he was recognized as a religious leader, often in competition with other religious leaders of the Jews; he amazed people with his teaching and authority. To what extent Jesus acquired scribal literacy through official education or informally and by his own intuition is unknown, but we do have evidence that at the age of twelve he was precocious and capable of dialoguing with teachers in the temple courts (Lk 2:45-47).

The other levels of literacy that Jesus could have had are not really possibilities at all. That is, we have no evidence to support the notion that Jesus could have or did serve as a professional copyist or that he could have or did compose written literature himself. If for theological reasons someone wants to argue that he could have, even though there's no evidence that he did, that would be outside the bounds of this inquiry. Actually, there are good reasons for why Jesus did not compose literature himself, and they will be discussed in the next proposition.

Conclusion

In many ways Jesus became incarnate in a culture counterintuitive to our own. Only the elite of first-century Palestine were functionally literate, and they were Jesus' opponents—namely, the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, chief priests and Sanhedrin. Almost everyone else in his audience was non-literate, unless they were slaves who had been trained in reading and writing.

Orality, then, was the modus operandi for Jesus' hearers, and Jesus accommodated his style of teaching to their m.o. In order to speak their language, he primarily told stories, using word pictures, dramatic actions, metaphors and the like to communicate truth. He was an itinerant teacher speaking to a non-literate society.

Although the people had secondhand acquaintance with texts, their world was hearing dominant. Their knowledge was less determined by what texts said and more by what people said who read and interpreted the texts. Jesus' hearers had no reason to expect and no reason to need his sayings to be recorded in writing. As we will see in proposition 10, what Jesus' hearers knew from what he said was sufficient—as far as he (and they) were concerned.

For Further Reading

Burge, Gary M. *Jesus, the Middle Eastern Storyteller*. Ancient Context, Ancient Faith. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.

Keith, Chris. *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee*. Library of Historical Jesus Studies 8 [Library of New Testament Studies 413]. London: T & T Clark, 2011.

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Proposition 9

Logos/*Word Referred to Oral Communication, Not to Written Texts*

Seeing the provocative subtitle "Flunking Biblical Interpretation 101" in Richard Schultz's book *Out of Context*, some Christians may cringe—if not feel a tinge of guilt.[1] Maybe we all should. From the "Prayer of Jabez" phenomenon, to proof-texting, to "textjacking"—from devotional readings, to sermons, to commentaries—Schultz finds hundreds of examples of "interpretive malpractice." Fortunately he concedes that it's almost never intentional, but hardly less injurious.

Considering also Eric Bargerhuff's *The Most Misused Verses of the Bible*, and recalling D. A. Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies* and Moisés Silva's *Has the Church Misread the Bible?*, all readers of the Bible should be on high alert for misconstrued meanings.[2] Misunderstanding Milton or Shakespeare would be bad enough. Misunderstanding God could be code blue.

One of the most obvious yet frequent errors in taking verses out of context is anachronism. Admittedly, it's difficult for modern readers not "to assimilate the unknown to the known, the unfamiliar to the familiar."[3] We read the Bible in light of what we know about our own culture, largely because we do not know enough about theirs. While there is much that we can know, it admittedly takes work to dig deep enough to find it. So books that help us go deeper are welcome. Carson has a chapter in which he discusses sixteen word study fallacies, one of which is semantic anachronism. Schultz narrows it down in his chapter to six common mistakes with words, one of which is anachronism. Every serious Bible student needs to read these chapters.[4]

The point of the present chapter is to help us to interpret the word *word* (Greek *logos*) in its original context in the Gospels. Our goal is to be "chronistic," not anachronistic. If we are to appreciate the orality of the New Testament, we must begin with a word that appears on almost every page, which reveals how people thought about the message that Jesus and the apostles proclaimed. Adjusting how *we* think to the way *they* thought is foundational for interpretation.

Logos as the Words and Teachings of Jesus

The first thing to note is what Greek lexicons and dictionaries state about *logos*. Though often glossed in English simply as *word*, it denoted an "utterance, chiefly oral."[5] Maybe this is not surprising given its cognate verb *legō*, which refers to an act of speaking. But if an oral concept was almost always present in occurrences of *logos*, that is surprising, at least to our textual reckoning.[6] The implication would be that when someone at the time of the New Testament heard *logos*, they would have intuitively thought of a word that was spoken orally and heard aurally. Oppositely, we're more likely to think of a word that someone wrote or printed on a page that we can read.

It may be a bit startling to realize that we may have to rethink one of our favorite verses: "For the word [*logos*] of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb 4:12 KJV). Strictly speaking, the proclamation of God's truth —the oral text of the gospel—is the powerful and life-changing *word of God*. This is the two-edged sword of the Spirit. But when we read *logos* and especially the phrase *word of God*, we assume the statement is referring to the written word, the Bible itself. Commentators quickly jump to this conclusion as well.[7] But on closer inspection, perhaps we have been reading *logos* anachronistically. If so, and if the phrase *word of God* is not referring to the Bible, what is the referent?

The best way to answer our questions—and to understand the oral culture of *logos*—begins with an examination of the occurrences of *logos* in the Gospels. It occurs over thirty times in each of three Gospels—Matthew, Luke and John—and twenty-five times in Mark. In addition to *logos*, the Greek word *rhēma* occurs over thirty times in the four Gospels. Here's what we find (only representative verses are included).

Singular forms of *logos* referred to the substance of Jesus' teachings:

> With many parables such as these he was preaching the *word* to them as they were able to hear. (Mk 4:33)
>
> They kept Jesus' *word* to themselves, debating what rising from the dead meant. (Mk 9:10)
>
> The man believed the *word* that Jesus spoke to him. (Jn 4:50)

Though singular in form, those occurrences of *logos* are examples of a collective singular, a grammatical construction that occurs in Greek, English and other languages.[8] The referent is the sum of what Jesus said on certain occasions. The same is true for *word* in the phrase *word of God* (see below).

Plural forms of *logos* could also refer to the content of what was stated orally:

> Everyone who hears these *words* of mine and does them . . . (Mt 7:24; Lk 6:47)
>
> Mary, sitting at the feet of the Lord, was hearing his *words*. (Lk 10:39)
>
> Whoever does not receive you nor hear your *words* . . . (Mt 10:14)

When Jesus said that "heaven and earth will pass away, but my *words* will never pass away" (Mt 24:35; Mk 13:31; Lk 21:33) he was affirming the enduring quality and authority of God's message expressed in his oral statements, not declaring something about future written records of what he said. To use Jesus' declaration as a proof-text for the inspiration of written Scripture is anachronistic. (See proposition 10 for more discussion.)

Singular or plural forms of *rhēma* designated things Jesus said:

> Peter remembered the *word* Jesus had spoken, "Before a rooster crows three times you will deny me." (Mt 26:75; Mk 14:72; Lk 22:61)
>
> When he [Jesus] completed all his *words* in the hearing of the people . . . (Lk 7:1)
>
> Place in your ears these *words* [*logoi*]; for the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men; but they did not understand this *word* [*rhēma*] . . . and they were afraid to ask him about this word [*rhēma*]. (Lk 9:44-45)

The phrase *word of God* also denoted Jesus' message:

> The crowd was pressing around him to hear the *word* of God. (Lk 5:1)
>
> This is the meaning of the parable: the seed is the *word* of God; the ones along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes the *word* from their hearts. (Lk 8:11-12)

> My mother and brothers, these are the ones who hear and live the *word* of God. (Lk 8:21)[9]

There were other oral referents for *logos*, such as a question or answer, or the content of what Jesus prayed:[10]

> Jesus said, "I will ask you one *word*." (Mt 21:24; Mk 11:29)
>
> No one was able to answer him a *word*. (Mt 22:46)
>
> He went away the third time and prayed the same *word*. (Mt 26:44; Mk 14:39)

The evidence from these verses (and others that could be cited) is convincing: in the context of the oral culture of Jesus' public ministry, *logos* (and *rhēma*) denoted spoken words. Even the phrase *word of God*, which is commonly used in Christian subculture as synonymous with the Bible, referred to oral proclamation. This is especially remarkable when we consider that by the time the Evangelists were writing the Gospels, they were in the process of recording Jesus' words in written form. It might make better sense to us if they had chosen a different Greek word for Jesus' spoken words and saved *logos* for written texts of his words. They easily could have used a Greek word like *lalia* (see Jn 4:42) or *logion* (see Rom 3:2). But what makes sense to us obviously didn't to them. It's likely that they did not see a significant distinction between oral and written texts.

Since in the context of Jesus' ministry of teaching and preaching the referent of *logos* (or *rhēma*) was the oral message that he proclaimed, it's evident that the *logos* of God was oral. Hence we may refer to Jesus' teachings as oral text.

Logos in Other Contexts

In Luke's prologue to his Gospel he uses both a singular and plural of *logos* to refer to oral texts that eyewitnesses had transmitted (Lk 1:1-4). A paraphrase of the relevant parts of what Luke wrote could be worded as follows: "I have investigated what the earliest eyewitnesses—indeed, they were servants of the word—passed down orally, so that by my written version of what happened you can be assured of the certainty of the words you were taught." In both uses of *logos*, Luke is referring to oral forms of Jesus' words and deeds. (See proposition

10 for more discussion of Luke's prologue.)

There are two exceptions where the context of *logos* was not Jesus' teachings, and in those passages *logos* designated something else. First, *logos* appeared in the context of citing the Old Testament. Matthew and Mark record Jesus' comment:

> God spoke, "Honor your father and mother," and "let the one who speaks evil of father or mother be put to death." But by what you say . . . you nullified God's statement [*logos*] for the sake of your tradition. (Mt 15:4-6; cf. Mk 7:10-13; the sources for the quote are Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16; Ex 21:17; Lev 20:9)

Similarly, John—in reference to Jesus' citation of the Old Testament—uses *logos* three times; for example, "In order that the statement [*logos*] of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled" (Jn 12:38; also 10:35; 15:25).

It's significant that while *logos* can refer to the Old Testament, Matthew and Mark record that Jesus introduced the quotes with *legō*, God *said*.[11] So although we find *logos* in the context of words that were written, it may have actually been referring to the oral forms of the text behind the written forms. Translating *logos* as "statement" in those cases (see above) echoes the oral origin of the Old Testament.

It seems clear then that there were parallel uses of *logos*, in both cases referring to divine truth. One denoted Jesus' oral version of truth, and the other referred to truth recorded in the Old Testament. Both originated from divine sources, and both were equally authoritative. There's no hint of one having precedence over the other (see proposition 10).

The second context in which *logos* appeared was the most unique of all. John infused the word with trinitarian grandeur in the prolegomenon to his Gospel. He declared that from the beginning Jesus was the "Word of God." John's affirmation focused on Jesus being fully God, both in the Father's presence in eternity past and in the apostles' presence in his incarnation. But more than affirming Jesus' deity, John pictured Jesus as the personification of divine truth. John did not say that "Jesus was the words of God," as if Jesus were a series of linguistic signs.[12] He said "Word of God," referring to the truth of God revealed in the person of his Son.[13]

While Scripture as inspiration gives access to the mind of God—even though it was communicated through human instruments—Jesus as revelation provides unprecedented access to God's thoughts, not in the form of oral text or written

text, but *living* text. Jesus was the performance, the manifestation, the embodiment of divine reason and wisdom.[14] God spoke his words into a *living* text, his Son.

John's declaration that Jesus was the Word of God is followed later in the Gospel by Jesus' comment, "The words which I say to you I do not speak from myself; the Father remaining in me does his works" (Jn 14:10). Also, John's statement that the Word "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14) is followed by Jesus' comment, "I have given them your word" (Jn 17:14).

Conclusion

The evidence from the Gospels is unanimous about the word *word*. When the context was the ministry of Jesus, *logos* (or *rhēma*) denoted speech. When the context was the Old Testament, *logos* referred to statements recorded in writing. When the context was the deity of Jesus, *logos* pictured the personification of divine truth.

While the orality of *logos* in the Gospels may be counterintuitive to those of us who think in primarily text-dominant ways, we must guard against being anachronistic in understanding the term. The referent for the phrase *word of God* was the spoken word (or, in the unique sense of Jesus, the living text).

This points the way toward a significant thesis. The cognitive environment of the gospel message was entirely oral. Jesus presented his teachings in oral forms, and his hearers grasped the truths that Jesus proclaimed by aural means. The Evangelists, who recorded Jesus' words and deeds, preserved the orality of Jesus' public ministry in their written records. There is no indication that they understood their written texts to somehow be different from or superior to the oral texts. But we're getting ahead of ourselves; the next chapter will explore this thesis in more detail. As Sir Edwyn Hoskyns stated, "Rescue a word . . . discover a universe."[15] We have rescued the word; now we need to discover the universe.

Proposition 10

Jesus Proclaimed Truth in Oral Forms and Commissioned His Followers to Do the Same

The Bible is a book of many books: fascinating genres, beautiful stories, engaging poetry. Within the books lie remarkably diverse forms of divine revelation, almost more than we can handle. If we're honest, the Bible is not what Western, modern Christians might expect or even wish from God.

We can be glad that the Bible is some of the best literature—if not the very best literature—ever written in the history of the human race. But we may be sad that it can take as much effort to understand as almost anything else humans have written. We can be glad that God chose to reveal himself and his Son and salvation through inspired writings. But we may be sad that Jesus' exact words and deeds were not recorded by stenographers on indelible manuscripts. We can be glad that scribes faithfully copied the Bible in hundreds of languages on thousands of manuscripts across more than a millennium. But we may be sad that the number of variants exceeds the number of manuscripts, leading to doubt about which words are the right ones in hundreds of verses.[1]

The ins and outs of the saga of divine revelation—originating in the mind of God, passed down to and through human vessels, much of it composed and transmitted orally, with written forms making their way across many centuries via the copies of many scribes—is lost on most Christians. They open their Bibles and see the perfectly printed, (hopefully) typo-free words in up-to-the-minute expressions of their mother tongue and think, Voila! Thus saith the Lord in my language and in my culture. It's the morning newspaper!

Modernized Bibles may mislead people, but the other alternative—ancient forms of the Bible—would repel them. Translators, interpreters and publishers knowingly accommodate the Bible's ancient dimensions into language and forms that make more sense in the twenty-first century. But it's not a straightforward process; multitudes of decisions have to be made about how best to translate the words and the culture of the Bible into understandable forms for modern audiences. And it's an imperfect process; some of what the Bible meant to the original hearers is inevitably lost.[2] Maybe accommodation has gone too

far. Do we really need Bibles for every niche market on the planet? A Bible for cat lovers?[3]

All of this is even more challenging since Western worldviews do not align with ancient ones. As Paul Hiebert unfolds in *Transforming Worldviews*, Christians have been slow to realize the negative impact of modernity on our worldview—including, among other things, how we understand Scripture, relationships, morality and human responsibility.[4] Our individualism and objectivism, for example, are glaringly out of sync with the ways of thinking in the Bible.[5]

The difference in worldviews is no more evident than between the modern, Western culture of written texts and the ancient culture of oral texts (see proposition 6 above). Even the term *oral text* is counterintuitive to our ears.[6] But that's precisely what came from Jesus' lips. He wrote nothing. He spoke everything.

In this chapter we will look closely at the Gospels and the evidence for orality. The preceding chapters have helped to prepare us for appreciating a world different from our own. Even so, we will probably be surprised at what we find. Remarkably, the oral form of Jesus' teachings was sufficient for his purposes and for his disciples' needs.

A Major Shift in the Study of the Gospels

A growing focus over the past few decades has been orality in the Gospels. It could be considered a revolution in scholarship. Earlier in the twentieth century, scholars gave considerable attention to oral traditions behind the written forms of the Gospels, but this is different. We will provide a brief overview of the developing story, which is ongoing.[7]

Perhaps if Jesus had become incarnate in a century since the days of Gutenberg's printing press, he would have left written records of his teachings, and he would have designed them to be printed in books so millions could read his words. It's rare in the modern world for someone with such important things to say not to put them in writing. But in first-century Palestine, it was perfectly normal for Jesus not to sit down with a quill, lamp-black ink and piece of papyrus and write. In the tradition of the rabbis, it certainly would have been unexpected had Jesus composed his thoughts in written form.

So the message of Jesus and his strategy to communicate that message were

entirely oral. Yet our records of what Jesus said and did are written. (What other option was there than written?) And the written records—at least when they were first put in writing—were almost certainly intended to be performed by oral interpreters for aural hearers. The question that grows out of these observations is, How does the orality of a text shape its meaning, or at least, How might an orally shaped text reveal clues to its meaning for non-oral readers?

Our narrative of a few highlights of the recent study of the Gospels begins with Birger Gerhardsson's *Memory and Manuscript,* published in 1961.[8] In contrast to the form criticism of earlier scholars, such as Rudolf Bultmann—which focused on the different literary forms within the Gospels, and assumed distortion of those traditional forms as they were orally transmitted—Gerhardsson contended that the written Gospels were actually the result of careful memorization. Working backward from a model drawn from later rabbinic Judaism, Gerhardsson proposed that Jesus spoke in ways so that his disciples could memorize his exact words along with exact accounts of what he did. These memorized oral texts then became the basis of the written Gospels. Though this approach was welcomed by many evangelicals, since it gave credence to the reliability of the Gospel records, the evidence has seemed too slim for Gerhardsson's proposal to withstand the critique of most scholars.[9]

Probably the most startling stimulus in the changing shape of scholarship was Werner Kelber's *The Oral and the Written Gospel,* published in 1983.[10] He drew widely from the work of classicists, linguists and cultural anthropologists. On the basis of their analysis of various oral cultures, especially on how traditions were created and transmitted, Kelber proposed a thoroughgoing oral modality for the Gospels.[11] As a result he was able to offer a more nuanced alternative to the theories of form criticism and Gerhardsson. He argued that since accounts of Jesus' words and deeds were repeated hundreds of times in oral performances, the characters, plot and main events were transmitted reliably, while specific details varied slightly. Thus the main outlines of the traditions were stable, even if incidental elements were fluid. But once the traditions were written down, the accounts and details became fixed and dominated the oral texts. Though Kelber's theory has been qualified in certain respects, the overall point has been a watershed in New Testament studies.

In the decades since Kelber there has been a growing mass of research, regarding both modern oral societies and orality in the New Testament.[12] As we will discuss in proposition 11, Kenneth Bailey's personal experiences with contemporary Middle Eastern culture led him to propose a model of "informal

and yet controlled" transmission of a community's history and values. The informal process of community gatherings in which traditions are told and retold permitted only as much freedom in recounting the stories as the community's self-imposed controls would allow. Richard Bauckham's thesis, on the other hand, posits a more formal process of eyewitness testimony carefully preserving the Jesus traditions.[13] Even so, he seeks to account for degrees of flexibility in the process of transmission. Further, the collection of essays in *Performing the Gospel* demonstrates the breadth of the interdisciplinary research entailed in seeking to grasp the ways written texts were shaped by the pervasive orality of both authors and hearers.[14] In the most up-to-date survey of research pertaining to oral texts of Jesus' words and deeds, Rafael Rodríguez argues that "performances of the tradition accrued a sense of stability and repetition by way of multiple performances through time . . . performances of the Jesus tradition [that] neither depended upon *script* nor left behind *transcript.*"[15]

Reading Orality from the Inside Out

With an overview in mind of what scholars have been concluding about the Gospels and orality, we turn to an examination of the Gospels themselves. Rather than standing outside and looking in through the eyes of scholars, we will move inside the Gospels and consider three things: evidence of, reasons for and implications of orality. In many respects, orality served Jesus' purposes very well.

The facts of the case are not difficult to see. Jesus was always talking with someone, often telling parables about the kingdom and occasionally preaching. His ministry was entirely oral, and his communication was usually face-to-face, though he did send oral messages via a messenger. He once said, referring to Herod, "Go tell that fox, 'Behold I am casting out demons and I will perform healings today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will be finished'" (Lk 13:32; in this case, however, Jesus' instructions to relay the message to Herod may have been tongue-in-cheek).

The whole purpose of Jesus' mission focused on his personal presence and a close relationship with his hearers. He appointed twelve apostles so that "he could be with them" (Mk 3:14). "He came unto his own. . . . The Word became flesh and made his residence among us" (Jn 1:11, 14). As John could say, "We beheld his glory" (Jn 1:14). Jesus asked Philip, "For such a long time I have

been with you, and you don't know me?" (Jn 14:9). One-on-one (or one-on-twelve) communication in the context of relationship was indispensable for Jesus' purposes. Orality gave him the best possible platform for convincing his hearers that he was God and that his message was from God. If God had not placed his Son among us, but only sent someone claiming to have an inscribed text from God, would anyone believe?

God's Son came with insights from outside this planet that explain life on this planet. Almost everything he said about the new order and society, the kingdom of heaven, was inherently counterintuitive and readily misunderstood. To put such startling heavenly truths in writing and not to be able to explain them in person, the confusion would almost certainly have been greater. This point is confirmed by Jesus' explaining things to his disciples in more detail, whereas he spoke in parables to the crowds: "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word [*logos*] to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything" (Mk 4:33-34 TNIV; cf. Mt 13:34; Jn 16:25). As pointed out in proposition 7, philosophers also preferred to explain their ideas in person rather than to write them out, which was the practice of rabbis as well.

The importance of Jesus' personal explanation is especially evident in his accompanying two disciples on their way out of Jerusalem toward Emmaus. They were dumbfounded by Jesus' crucifixion and by strange reports that his tomb was empty. After all, "he was a prophet, powerful in deed and word before God and all the people" (Lk 24:19). So Jesus "explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures" (Lk 24:27). It was an extraordinary occasion, both for the two disciples and for all since who have shared in their experience secondhand. Too bad we do not have a transcript of what Jesus said. We only hear that the two disciples' hearts were on fire as he interpreted the Scriptures; they immediately returned to Jerusalem to tell about the amazing incident (Lk 24:32-35).

From the standpoint of Jesus' hearers, it was vital to experience his persona and power firsthand. The disciples witnessed his control over demons, illness and nature. They were in close range when he delivered the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-2; Lk 6:20). At Jesus' transfiguration Peter, James and John heard the voice from heaven speak, "This is my beloved Son" (Mt 17:5-6). The disciples participated in the triumphal entry; they prayed with Jesus in the Garden (or slept while he prayed); most of them disappeared into the shadows

when he was arrested; they celebrated his resurrection; they looked intently as Jesus ascended back to heaven; and so forth. Peter could rightly attest to being one of the "eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet 1:16). It wasn't enough to read a transcript of what Jesus said, as if that were possible. It was essential to read the living text of the person who was speaking.

Much of what Jesus sought to communicate entailed an emotion and poignancy that can only be partly conveyed in written form. For example:

> As the crowds increased, Jesus said, "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom; and now one greater than Solomon is here. The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now one greater than Jonah is here." (Lk 11:29-32 TNIV)

To have been present and to have observed Jesus' body language, to have seen his facial expressions, to have heard the tone of his voice, such invective would have only been much more astonishing. Did he raise his voice? Was there fire in his eyes? Or were his words full of compassion?

In fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, Jesus didn't come with written words; he came with a new covenant in which God's law would be written on people's hearts. Jeremiah records the word of the Lord:

> "Indeed, a time is coming," says the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I delivered them from Egypt. . . . I will make a new covenant with the whole nation of Israel after I plant them back in the land," says the LORD. "I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts and minds. I will be their God and they will be my people." (Jer 31:31-33 NET).

So in the parable of the sower and the soils, Jesus says that the seeds scattered along the path, which the birds ate, are like people who hear "and then the devil comes and takes away the word [*logos*] from their hearts" (Lk 8:5, 12; cf. Mk 4:15).

Maybe highest in importance for grasping the significance of Jesus' orality is what he himself declared about the necessity of speaking directly to his audience: "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be responsible for their sin; but now they do not have excuse for their sin" (Jn 15:22).

In all of this, the reasons for and significance of Jesus' face-to-face communication make reasonable sense. But from the vantage point of a modern, text-dominant culture, it still strikes us as odd that there was no hint of textuality. For such important truths not to be recorded in something more permanent (at least permanent in ways we would expect) seems almost irresponsible. But Jesus was never recorded as saying something like, "This is important; write it down."[16] And the disciples gave no indication during Jesus' ministry that the thought ever crossed their minds of inscribing anything Jesus said or did.[17]

Jesus simply spoke and people simply listened.[18] His message and strategy seemed to fit perfectly in a culture of orality. Although it seems strange to us, it was simply unnecessary—and maybe it would have been counterproductive—for Jesus to put his words in writing.[19]

Implications of Jesus' Orality

Based on what we know about the text-possible-yet-hearing-prevalent society of the Greeks and Romans, and about the preference of philosophers and rabbis for orality over textuality, we should not be surprised to find that Jesus' public ministry was entirely oral. But we may not be prepared for what orality means for the literary production of the Gospels.

1. The truths that Jesus proclaimed in oral form bore the imprint of divine authority. In contrast to text-dominant logic in which we would want to see someone's words in written form in order to know for sure what they stated, the words Jesus spoke were as authoritative as anything written. On various occasions, Jesus affirmed the divine source of what he said.

> "The One whom God sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit beyond measure." (Jn 3:34)
>
> "I do nothing on my own, but just as the Father taught me, I speak these things." (Jn 8:28)
>
> "The words which you gave me I gave to them, and they received them

and they knew without a doubt that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me." (Jn 17:8)[20]

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exercised an oral authority equal to or greater than the Law of Moses. Repeatedly he noted, "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . ." (e.g., Mt 5:21). Along the same lines, it's evident that Matthew in his Gospel was presenting Jesus as the new Moses.[21]

This places the authority of the words of Jesus on par with the authority of the written texts of the Old Testament. The source of both was the Father, and there is no suggestion that written forms were inherently more authoritative. Jesus' oral texts were the new deposit of divine revelation. In oral culture, written forms were not thought of as something independent from, different from or better than oral texts. They could be equally authoritative and reliable.

Further, in the minds of Jesus' hearers his authority was established by his teaching, as cited at various points in his ministry.[22] Even his opponents could not deny his authority, though they inquired about its source.[23] The recognition of Jesus' authority was probably the result of several factors: the uniqueness of his teaching, his insight and ability to get to the heart of matters, his eloquence and emotional language, his figures of speech and parables, his persona and personality, and all of this authenticated by displays of miraculous powers.

2. Jesus expected his spoken words to have lasting permanence. Jesus announced, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Mt 24:35; Mk 13:31; Lk 21:33). As demonstrated in proposition 9, the referent for *logos* was Jesus' oral texts, so a written form of his words was not the focal point. Again, the contrast with text-dominant logic is striking; we would think words needed to be written to be permanent.

Someone may well plead, Isn't it legitimate to argue by inference that Jesus' statement could apply to written Scripture even though it was not in existence when Jesus made the statement? To which we respond, That would be misleading on two accounts. First, it tranquilizes the concept that an oral culture has the ability to preserve truth over long periods of time. Though alien to modern thinking, we need to reckon with the possibility that written forms are not necessarily significantly more enduring or reliable. In other words, it may be wrong to presume that Jesus' words suddenly became more permanent when recorded in written form, as if our textual culture is better at preserving truth than their oral culture. Only if we are unable or unwilling to accept the thinking of a hearing-dominant culture will we seek to shift Jesus' statement about the

permanence of his words into a text-dominant culture.

The second reason an inference about a textual form of Jesus' statement would be incorrect is evident in the context of the passage. With an apocalyptic undertone, Jesus is using end-of-the-world language to describe troubling events on the horizon. There was no question that these things would happen and would happen soon. To affirm the reliability of his apocalyptic pronouncements, Jesus declared that his words were true—as true as the very existence of heaven and earth—and permanent. Thus, parallel to the statement at the end of the Apocalypse that "if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy" he will lose his share in the tree of life, the function of Jesus' statement was to declare his prophecy to be sacrosanct (see Rev 22:19). It was inviolable and unchallengeable. So a written version of Jesus' words misses the point that Jesus was making.

Someone else may argue, But Jesus confirmed elsewhere that the words of Scripture would last forever. To which we respond, What Jesus said—when understood in context—was not about the specific words of Scripture nor about a future written form of his own words. He said, "Until heaven and earth pass away an iota or stroke will not pass away from the Law until all these things come to pass" (Mt 5:18; cf. Lk 16:17). Jesus was stressing that even though he was setting forth an enhanced moral code for the kingdom, he was not abrogating the Old Testament Law. His reference to the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet and to the serif on certain Hebrew letters was a word picture (hyperbole) in order to highlight his point. It was the precepts of the Law that would last forever.[24]

3. Jesus expected his spoken words to be remembered and passed on to others. Jesus' concluding statement in the parable of the sower and soils explained the meaning of the seed that fell on good soil: it is people with a good heart who hear the word, hold on to it (NIV "retain it") and by persevering bear fruit (Lk 8:15). It's not surprising, then, that Jesus said the disciples should remember what he told them. "Remember the things [*logos*] I told you" (Jn 15:20; cf. 16:4). "Then he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and shared it with them. 'This is My body, My body given for you. Do this to remember me'" (Lk 22:19 The Voice).

Looking back across the months and years of his ministry, Jesus summarized his approach: "Daily I sat in the temple courts teaching" (Mt 26:55; Mk 14:49; Lk 22:53); "I always taught in the synagogue and temple courts . . . those who heard me know what I said" (Jn 18:20-21). In other words, what else was

necessary? Fait accompli.

Later Peter would declare that he did remember what Jesus said (Acts 11:16). Yet on occasion Jesus rebuked his disciples because they did not remember: “Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand and how many baskets you had left over?” (Mt 16:9; Mk 8:18).

Unmistakably, the oral form of Jesus’ teachings was sufficient for his purposes and for his followers’ needs. And even more, he commissioned the disciples to pass along his teachings orally. When he appointed the twelve apostles, he gave as the purpose “so he could send them out to preach” (Mk 3:14; cf. Mt 10:7). And Jesus told the apostles that it would not be them speaking but “the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Mt 10:20).

Just before entering the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for the disciples regarding passing on his oral message. Twice he acknowledged that he had given them the words the Father had given him (Jn 17:8 [*rhēmata*] and 14 [*logos*]). He said he was sending them into the world as his representatives (Jn 17:18). Then Jesus prayed for the second generation of believers: “I pray not only for these, but also for the ones who will believe in me through their message [*logos*]” (Jn 17:20). So it would be the oral message of the apostles that would build the church.

Similarly, Matthew concludes his Gospel with Jesus and the disciples on another mountain. Jesus gives a charge to the apostles to make disciples of all nations, “teaching them to obey everything that I commanded you” (Mt 28:20). The verbs *to make disciples* and *to teach* are always used in the New Testament for oral communication, and what Jesus commanded was entirely oral as well.

4. Jesus’ oral texts became the oral texts of the eyewitnesses, and those oral texts became the basis of the written Gospels, yet the written texts did not replace the oral texts. In the prologue to his Gospel, Luke helps us connect the dots between Jesus’ oral message and the written Gospels. Though writing three decades or so after the time of Jesus, Luke affirmed the validity of his account by citing “eyewitnesses and servants” of the *logos* who had passed on accounts “concerning the things that were completed among us” (Lk 1:1-2). Even without Luke using the word *logos* we might have concluded that he is referring to oral texts that formed the basis of his Gospel. But *logos* confirms it.[25]

Luke continues that it seemed appropriate for him to write an accurate account of the things (*logos*) that Theophilus had been taught. Again Luke makes clear by the use of *logos* that Theophilus had learned about the life of Jesus from oral texts that had been passed down. So twice in Luke’s prologue he

attests to the oral traditions that immediately preceded his composing a written account of the life of Jesus. (Note—though an argument from silence—there is no hint of early written records that preceded the writing of the Gospels.)[26]

There is yet one more comment of Luke's that surprises us. He does not understand his written account to be superior to the oral accounts. In affirming the instruction his readers have already received, Luke acknowledges the existing oral texts and says, "It seemed right also for me to compile an account" (Lk 1:3-4). Luke's Greek word "also me" (*kamoi*) implies that his written text could be grouped with the oral ones. He was not seeking to replace the oral texts of his predecessors with his written version.[27] Contrary to our text-dominant logic by which we would expect Luke's written version to supersede the oral texts, hearing-dominant societies are known to continue to depend on oral texts even when written texts have become available.

A century after Luke, Papias is reported to have said (according to Eusebius), "I do not believe that things out of books are as beneficial to me as things from a living and enduring voice" (*Hist. Eccl*. 3.39.4). In other words, Papias preferred hearing something over reading it. This preference for the oral over the textual continued at least into the second century (see propositions 5 and 17).

5. The authority of oral testimony about the life of Jesus became the basis of the authority of written records. The apostle John concluded his Gospel with an affirmation of its truthfulness: "This is the disciple who bore witness concerning these things and who wrote these things, and we know that his witness is true" (Jn 21:24; see also 21:25). Since the Greek word *witness* generally designated something oral, the first part of John's statement refers to his eyewitness role of passing along oral texts of Jesus' words and deeds. Apparently that went on for decades without John writing anything down. In the second part of his statement he acknowledges that he has now inscribed that testimony in writing. Unlike Luke, who was not an eyewitness, John could simply commit to writing things that he had experienced and repeated orally over and over again. In the last part of his statement John affirms the veracity of his testimony, referring to both the oral and written versions. Everything he said was true.

Conclusion

Jesus was an itinerant preacher in a world marked by orality. He communicated

in oral forms, which were authoritative. He passed the mantle on to his followers, which in turn gave their oral word authority. Eyewitnesses passed along oral texts of what Jesus said and did, which became the basis of Luke's Gospel, which also had authority. John was an oral witness about Jesus' life long before he wrote anything, and when he did the authority of his oral texts carried over to his written text. This is the authority structure of oral culture.

Why Jesus depended exclusively on orality throughout his ministry is a lingering question that will never be answered completely. Hopefully, it's a moot question now that we understand oral culture better. Oral texts were completely adequate and were even preferred in the hearing-dominant society of the Jews and early Christians.

The orality of the Gospels has significant implications for the way the Gospels came into being. As we will see in the next chapter, one of the implications is variants among the Gospel accounts.

For Further Reading

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Proposition 11

Variants Were Common in the Oral Texts of Jesus' Words and Deeds

In May 1879, Chief Standing Bear, a Native American, stood before a US district judge in Omaha, Nebraska. The judge permitted the plaintiff to personally address the court. The effect was profound: women sobbed, tears stained men's faces, and they all rushed to shake Chief Standing Bear's hand at the conclusion of his speech. Later, a journalist for the *Omaha Daily Herald* reported that you simply had to be present to appreciate the moment; reading the court reporter's record of the speech after the fact, one could not grasp the powerful emotions of the chief's words. The result was a landmark civil rights victory for Native Americans. No longer were they to be considered second-class citizens.

But there is more to the story.[1] Modern historians find a number of variants in the details of that historic day. For example, there are differing reports—since Chief Standing Bear could not speak English—of who his interpreter was. According to some sources the interpreter was a twenty-two-year-old store hand who had learned the native Omaha Indian language. But there's some evidence that Bright Eyes, a daughter of a different Omaha Indian chief, had learned English and was the interpreter.

In the eyes of skeptics, the differences in detail may seem to call into question the credibility of the whole story. But for most people—especially Native Americans—the effect of the trial and especially of Chief Standing Bear's speech attests to the historicity of the momentous event. Whatever differences in detail turn up, no one can take away the major contributing factors that resulted in a favorable decision by the judge or the overall importance of what transpired.

The issue we are facing in this chapter can be troubling or encouraging. Do differences in detail among the Gospels take anything away from the credibility of the accounts of Jesus' words and deeds? Or is the essential agreement on the events sufficient to attest their historicity? Were the events momentous irrespective of variants in the accounts?

Propositions 8 through 10 demonstrated that Jesus thoroughly embraced the hearing-dominant culture of first-century Palestine. He accommodated himself and his message to an oral culture and gave no indication that the culture was deficient or that his followers should move beyond orality and record his message in written form. Nothing in the Gospels suggests that the oral texts of Jesus' words and deeds would be inadequate for the Christian movement. But how accurately do oral cultures transmit their stories?

While there are many things about the oral texts of the Gospels that we would like to know, the evidence is limited. To what extent were the powers of memory of Jesus' followers able to preserve faithfully the content of his teachings? Were the oral traditions that passed along stories of Jesus' deeds fixed and stable? In other words, how accurately were Jesus' teachings preserved and passed on? (Our real question is, How accurately *by modern standards* were Jesus' teachings preserved and passed on?)

There is a body of evidence for evaluating the oral texts that is often overlooked. As we will see below, that evidence is in the Gospels themselves. But before we consider that, it's essential that we understand the ways oral cultures may transmit traditions.

A Recent Example of Preserving and Transmitting Oral Texts

In contrast to the text-dominant ways of Western culture, Kenneth Bailey recounts life in a traditional Middle Eastern culture where passing along traditions of communities via oral forms is standard procedure.[2] The preservation of a community's history and cultural values is accomplished by selected villagers reciting the stories and poetry that were passed down from ancestors. Repetition is the norm and is at the heart of the system. Although it's possible for members of the community to record their traditions in written form, there is no desire or reason to do so. The core value of the community is orality, not literacy. "The written word is not valued highly. It is not considered an independent mode of expression."[3]

When a village gathers in the evening for the recounting of traditional stories or the reciting of well-known poetry, various men participate, depending on who may be socially more prominent or may know certain stories better. Meanwhile, villagers listen intently to the same stories and poetry over and over again. In due time everyone will know them well, and at some point it may be their turn to

pass on the same stories.

The content of the recitations often includes proverbs. A single community may preserve as many as six thousand wisdom sayings. Two forms of poetry are recited: classical poems preserved across hundreds of years, and impromptu verse composed by skilled poets who create stanzas ad lib for special occasions, such as weddings. In addition, three types of stories are passed along, most significantly accounts of village heroes.

Little control over the content of these recitations is necessary beyond that of the community itself. The reciters know that most of the villagers have heard the stories and poetry many times before, and they dare not veer too far from the standard structure and wording. This is especially true for proverbs and poetry: a single wrong word is quickly recognized by villagers, and the speaker is publicly corrected.

For parables and stories, on the other hand, the reciter is allowed flexibility in recounting specific details. The main lines of the story are fixed and cannot be changed, but if he chooses to invert the order of some scenes or tell the story in his own style or with a few added details, that is acceptable within the community's value structures. "The storyteller had a certain freedom to tell the story in his own way as long as the central thrust of the story was not changed. . . . The storyteller could change, say, 15 percent of the story—any 15 percent."[4] But over time the essence of the story remained the same. In other words, it would be unlikely that the authenticity of a story would ever be challenged. No one was permitted to change a key element. It would be completely inexcusable for a reciter to alter a fixed portion of the account. But neither would the authenticity of a story ever be challenged if reciters embellished non-fixed portions of a story to suit their purposes. The primary point is that reciters were granted a measure of flexibility; variance in incidental details was acceptable to the community.

This example from Middle Eastern culture leads Bailey to propose that the villagers' method is likely to have been similar to the process of transmitting Jesus' teachings. He refers to the model as informal controlled oral tradition. This is in contrast to other theories of tradition criticism such as proposed by Bultmann or Gerhardsson.[5] Bailey concludes, "We have observed a classical methodology for the preservation, control and transmission of tradition that provides, on the one hand, assurance of authenticity and, on the other, freedom within limits for various forms of that tradition."[6]

As noted in proposition 10, Bailey's thesis about oral transmission is one of

several theses that have been proposed. Bauckham's proposal, though arguing for a more formal process of eyewitness testimony, ends up at nearly the same point: as oral texts of Jesus' words and deeds were passed along, the core content remained largely the same, while varying degrees of flexibility in details were acceptable.[7]

Encountering Oral Texts Through the Gospels

Applying the model of Bailey or Bauckham to the Gospels is a crux for understanding how Jesus' teachings may have been preserved and passed on. If, on the one hand, the community of Jesus' followers considered it essential to preserve the precise wording of Jesus' verbal statements, then we have reason to believe they could have done so. Oral cultures can do that. If, on the other hand, the community of followers was committed to preserving carefully what Jesus said but not necessarily using exact wording or strict details, nor using the same wording or details every time in which the oral versions of his teachings were retold, then we have reason to accept that methodology as faithful within the value system of an ancient oral culture.

When the point came for the oral texts of the gospel message to be committed to writing, we can presume that whatever level of faithfulness of transmission was followed by the community of believers during the oral phase, the same or similar level would have been applied to written forms of the gospel. It's unlikely that the Evangelists suddenly broke with the tradition of the oral texts of the believing community and introduced willy-nilly notions into their written texts. In other words, we should be able to look back through the written texts of the Gospels to get a glimpse of what the oral texts were like.

Now, as is well known, the four Gospels preserve differing accounts of many aspects of Jesus' life and ministry. A few examples will suffice:

- Matthew and Luke differ on the order of Jesus' three temptations. (Mt 4:5; Lk 4:9)
- Matthew and Luke differ on whether Jesus promised that the Father would give good gifts or that he would give the Holy Spirit. (Mt 7:11; Lk 11:13)
- The Synoptic Gospels differ on whether Jesus said to take a staff and sandals; the Gospels agree on traveling light, but not how light. (Mt

10:10; Mk 6:8-9; Lk 9:3)

- Matthew and Mark differ on whether Jesus rebuked the disciples for having little faith or no faith. (Mt 8:26; Mk 4:39-40)
- Matthew and Mark differ on whether the rich young ruler asked Jesus about what is good or whether he called Jesus good. (Mt 19:16; Mk 10:18)

In addition, there are places where—at least from a modern viewpoint—we would particularly expect precise wording. The voice of God from heaven at Jesus' baptism declared that Jesus was his beloved Son in whom he was well pleased, but the Gospels record two different versions of the wording: "This is my Son," and "You are my Son" (Mt 3:17; Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22). The result is the same, for whether God spoke to his Son or about his Son is incidental to the main point. Similarly, the voice of God from heaven at Jesus' transfiguration declared that Jesus was his Son, but the Gospels record three different versions of the wording: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Mt 17:5); "This is my beloved Son" (Mk 9:7); "This is my chosen Son" (Lk 9:35). Though *beloved* and *chosen* are different words, the meaning is essentially the same.

Jesus' question to the disciples at the town of Caesarea varies between whether he asked who "the people" or "the crowds" said he was (respectively, Mt 16:13; Lk 9:18). Only Matthew records that Jesus referred to himself in his question as "the Son of Man" (Mt 16:13). Further, Peter's reply to Jesus' question differs considerably: "You are the Anointed, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16); "You are the Anointed" (Mk 8:29); "The Anointed of God" (Lk 9:20). Maybe most surprising of all is that the four Gospels do not agree on the wording of the placard that Pilate posted on Jesus' cross:

This is Jesus, king of the Jews. (Mt 27:37)

The king of the Jews. (Mk 15:26)

This is the king of the Jews. (Lk 23:38)

Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. (Jn 19:19)

Now, it would be overly skeptical to conclude that these kinds of differences were the result of random carelessness or a total disregard for historicity. Many scholars such as Darrell Bock have offered various explanations for variants in

the Gospel accounts.[8] For one thing, the Evangelists felt free to rearrange the order of events to suit the points they were making. For another, Jesus most often spoke Aramaic, which when translated by different people into Greek would not necessarily have been rendered the same way.[9] Plus, "the ability to be exhaustive or detailed in the ancient context was limited by the largely oral world in which they functioned."[10]

It's especially important to recognize that a modern view of historiography must not be the standard by which we judge ancient practices of writing history. Again quoting Bock, "To have accurate summaries of Jesus' teaching is just as historical as to have his actual words; they are just two different perspectives to give us the same thing. All that is required is that the summaries be trustworthy."[11]

The evidence then suggests that the gospel message preserved the *essential essence* of things Jesus and the disciples said and did. If there are variations in the written Gospels, it's likely there were similar variations in the oral texts. It's safe to conclude that a precision of wording was not expected either in the oral transmission or in the written records. "There is more to history than precise chronological sequence or always relating the exact same detail or reporting something in the same words."[12]

Another way to think of the core concept is to recognize that the Gospels preserve the *ipsissima vox* of Jesus' words and actions, not the *ipsissima verba*. It's a contrast between the exact voice (*vox*) and the precise wording (*verba*). In other words, we may not have the exact words of Jesus, but we do have the essential *word*.[13] The Gospels can be trusted as reliable representations of the words and deeds of Jesus.

To affirm that the Gospels preserved the essential essence of Jesus' words and deeds may appear at first glance to be redundant. But the word *essence* can refer to the flavor of something from which it was extracted, a concentrated form of what it represents. In that sense, the Gospels preserve the true flavor in condensed form of what Jesus said and did. *Essential* can refer to that which is vital and indispensable. Thus the Gospels are the essence of the essential truths Jesus communicated. They are a reproduction; they are portraits painted by the Evangelists, and we contend they are true likenesses. If Jesus were to look in the Gospels as in a mirror, he would say, "Yes, that's me. That's what I said."

Skeptics, however, may discount the likelihood of even the essential essence of Jesus' words and actions being preserved accurately. How would hearers retain even that much of Jesus' stories and teachings? Bailey describes his own

experience of speaking in an oral culture:

> Often while preaching I would tell a story new to the community. At the conclusion of the telling of the story the attention of the congregation would literally break up in what I discovered was a form of oral shorthand. The elder on the front row would shout across the church to a friend in a loud voice, “Did you hear what the preacher said? He said . . .” and then would come a line or two of the story including the punch-line. People all across the church instinctively turned to their neighbours and repeated the central thrust of the story twice and thrice to each other. They wanted to retell the story that week across the village and they had to learn it on the spot. The preacher was not *allowed* to continue until they had done so.[14]

Whether this modern example of an oral culture’s method of preserving a speaker’s words was similar to the process in Jesus’ day we do not know. But Jesus counted on his audiences to remember the content of his oral texts without writing them down.

Conclusion

Jesus lived in a predominantly non-literate and oral culture. He proclaimed truth in oral forms and commissioned his followers to do the same. His followers, beginning with eyewitnesses, passed along oral versions of what Jesus said and did. And as suggested in Luke’s prologue, the oral texts became the basis of the Gospels.

Whether there were intermediary written forms between the oral and written texts of the Gospels we cannot be sure (see proposition 13). Other than what Luke describes, we know little about when and how oral texts of the gospel message were turned into written texts. For the purposes of this study, our primary interest is the evidence of the oral impact on the written form of the gospel, or in the case of this chapter, the evidence in the written texts of the Gospels for the shape of the oral texts of the gospel message. We assume that the written Gospels provide a window into the world of the oral gospels.

Based on variants in written texts, we can infer that oral texts did not manifest a form of sacrosanct wording that prescribed and regulated every detail and every word, as if transmitters of the tradition adhered to the standards of

modern historical accuracy. Variants occurred, but the degree of variation was within the limits of the values of the oral community. We can safely conclude that the accounts, whether in oral or written form, preserved what Jesus said and what Jesus did.

Thus, ways in which the Gospel records differ is not a liability for Christian faith and witness. Though the differences may appear to entail errors, that is a case of judging them by modern standards. They were not errors according to the standards of those who passed along the oral texts or authored the written texts. Differences in detail between the Gospels ought to take nothing away from the credibility of the accounts of Jesus' words and deeds. Further, it is not necessary to explain away the differences by some means of harmonization in order to fit modern standards of accuracy. The events were momentous irrespective of variants in the accounts.

Looking ahead to proposition 13, the next phase of transmission of the gospel message is copyists producing additional manuscripts of written texts. But similar to the oral transmitters, the scribes did not consider the words sacrosanct and unchangeable.

Proposition 12

Throughout the New Testament, Spoken Words Rather Than Written Words Were the Primary Focus

For decades the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah proclaimed the word of the Lord to the royal family and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. It was an urgent message and a lonely mission. But there seemed to be no hurry for him to record his sermons in writing. Perhaps it seemed unnecessary. Hadn't God said that the important thing was for the message to be written on people's hearts? "Listen to me, you who know righteousness; you people who have my law in your hearts" (Is 51:7; cf. Jer 31:33). Nevertheless, after Jeremiah preached for twenty-three years God instructed him to write: "Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel, Judah, and all the nations, from when I started speaking to you—from the reign of Josiah—until now" (Jer 36:2).

For decades eyewitnesses and members of the Christian communities told and retold the stories of Jesus' life. The book of Acts recounts how vital that gospel message was in the life of the early church. But there seemed to be no urgency to record the stories in written form. Jesus was crucified about A.D. 30. The first Gospel (Mark?) was apparently not written until A.D. 50 or after. Perhaps the focus of the early Christians was having God's word in their hearts.

The apostle Paul—following his conversion in approximately A.D. 35—became an itinerant preacher, proclaiming the gospel in various cities such as Damascus and Antioch. His first missionary journey, which had a definite sense of urgency, was approximately ten years later. But Paul didn't write his first letter (Galatians, 1 Thessalonians?) until close to A.D. 50.[1] The apostle Peter, a leader of the disciples and the early church, didn't write his first letter until A.D. 60 or after. Jude apparently wrote his letter in the 60s. The book of Hebrews was likely written in the 60s. James may have written his letter a decade earlier, maybe as early as the late 40s. The apostle John probably didn't write his Gospel and letters until the 80s or 90s.

In the book of Acts, Luke—against the grain of our thinking—records nothing about Christians composing written records of their messages or about any of the apostles writing letters (though see Acts 15:22-29). It's almost a

surprise to turn the last page of the book of Acts and find thirteen letters written by Paul and eight general epistles written by five different authors, some of which were written during the time period covered by Acts.

In this chapter, we turn from the Gospels to the rest of the New Testament, looking for evidence of the transition from oral to written texts. We may be surprised by the extent to which the primary focus of the early Christians continued to be orality. We begin with the word *logos*, taking up where we left off in proposition 9.

Logos as Oral Text in Acts and the Epistles

Many of the things true in the Gospels about orality are true throughout the New Testament. Even in the midst of authors sending written texts (letters) to various audiences, oral culture remained prominent.

Logos appears nearly two hundred times in the books of Acts through Jude. But for a couple of exceptions it denotes oral text, particularly the proclamation of the gospel.

> [Peter declared] God decided that through my mouth the nations would hear the message [*logos*] of the gospel and believe. (Acts 15:7)

> When you heard the message [*logos*] of truth, the gospel of your salvation. (Eph 1:13)

> Accept the implanted *logos*, which is able to save your souls; be doers of the *logos* and not hearers only so you don't deceive yourselves. . . . Whoever is a hearer of the *logos* and not a doer . . . (Jas 1:21-23)

> The old commandment is the message [*logos*] that you heard. (1 Jn 2:7)

Three passages are particularly significant in that they distinguish between oral text and written text.

> Do not become alarmed by some spirit or report [*logos*] or letter as though from us. (2 Thess 2:2)

> Stand firm, brothers, and hold on to the traditions you were taught, whether by speech [*logos*] or by our letter. (2 Thess 2:15)

> The law appointed men of weakness as high priests, but the decree [*logos*] of affirmation, which came after the law, appointed a son made perfect forever. (Heb 7:28)

The phrase *logos of God* occurs thirty-five times (and *rhēma of God* four times), while the phrase *word of the Lord* (including *word of Christ*) using both *logos* and *rhēma* appears sixteen times.[2] The *word* was the good news of the kingdom and the new birth. It was the light of the world. Spokespersons proclaimed and people heard this sacred message of God's saving grace.[3] *Logos* could also refer to the spoken voice of God in creation.

> When they had testified and proclaimed the *logos* of the Lord . . . (Acts 8:25)

> Faith is from hearing, and hearing through the word [*rhēma*] of Christ. (Rom 10:17)

> When you received the *logos* of God, which you heard from us, you did not receive it as the *logos* of humans, but as it truly is, the *logos* of God. (1 Thess 2:13)

> They readily forget that long ago by the *logos* of God the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by means of water. (2 Pet 3:5)

The oral meaning of the *word of God* was especially significant in the book of Acts. The early church's emphasis on evangelization was based on the oral text of the good news.

> Give your servants the ability to speak your *logos* with all boldness. . . . And they were speaking the *logos* of God with boldness. (Acts 4:29, 31)

> The *logos* of God kept on spreading, and the number of disciples in Jerusalem kept on increasing significantly. (Acts 6:7)

> [Paul] remained [in Corinth] a year and six months teaching among them the *logos* of God. (Acts 18:11)[4]

Orality in the book of Acts is further evident in the oral witnesses to Jesus' words and deeds, along with the sermons that Luke records. Just before his ascension Jesus commanded the apostles to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). In

selecting a replacement apostle, one of the criteria was that he be an eyewitness of Jesus' earthly ministry and that he join the apostles as oral witnesses to Jesus' resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). Common throughout Acts, the apostles refer to their role as witnesses (e.g., Acts 2:32; 10:41-42). Thus during the first thirty years of the history of the early church, the ministry of the apostles—at least according to Luke's record—was entirely oral.[5]

Since *logos* (and *rhēma*) denoted oral texts of the gospel, the result is that several favorite verses of many Christians—which they assume refer directly to the written words of Scripture—actually do not. Paul noted that Jesus purifies the church "with the washing of the water in the word [*rhēma*]" (Eph 5:26). He said to "take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word [*rhēma*] of God" (Eph 6:17). He said, "Let the word [*logos*] of Christ dwell in you abundantly, teaching and instructing one another with all wisdom" (Col 3:16). Peter said, "You have been born again not from perishable seed but from imperishable—through the living and abiding word [*logos*] of God . . . for the word [*rhēma*] of the Lord abides forever" (1 Pet 1:23, 25). These verses—as well Hebrews 4:12 (see proposition 9)—focus on truths that the believers had heard orally. Christians retaining and proclaiming the oral text of the gospel was essential for the community of believers to become mature in faith and wisdom.

A richness of modifiers was used to describe *logos*: "the word of grace" (Acts 14:3; 20:32); the "word of the gospel" (Acts 15:7); "words of human wisdom" (1 Cor 1:17; cf. 12:8); the "word of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18); "the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19); "the word of truth" (2 Cor 6:7; Eph 1:13; Col 1:5; 2 Tim 2:15; Jas 1:18); "a word of evil" (Eph 4:29); "the word of life" (Phil 2:16; 1 Jn 1:1); "the word of men" (1 Thess 2:13); "the words of faith" (1 Tim 4:6); "word of exhortation" (Heb 13:22). In many verses "message" is an appropriate gloss for *logos,* for the context makes clear that oral texts were in view.

There is an exception to *logos* denoting oral text. Similar to use in the Gospels is its use in reference to the Old Testament. At the Council in Jerusalem, James noted, "The statements [*logoi*] of the prophets are in agreement with this" (Acts 15:15), and then he quoted Amos 9:11-12. Paul writes, "This was the statement [*logos*] of promise" (Rom 9:9), and then he quotes Genesis 18:10 and 14. Regarding a quote from Isaiah 25:8 about death being swallowed up in victory, Paul writes, "Then the statement [*logos*] that was written will come to pass" (1 Cor 15:54).[6] In the context of hearing the prophets, Peter uses the term "prophetic *logos*" (2 Pet 1:19; see proposition 18).

Also, as in the Gospels, echoes of the oral origins of the Old Testament are evident. The book of Hebrews in particular uses language of speech to cite the Old Testament: “God having spoken to the forefathers through the prophets at various times and in various ways has in these last days spoken to us through his Son” (Heb 1:1). Twenty times verbs denoting speech introduce Old Testament quotations in the book of Hebrews (see proposition 18).

In contrast to nearly two hundred occasions when *logos* referred to speech, there are two contexts where that was not true. At the beginning of Luke’s second volume, he referred to the Gospel he compiled: “The first account [*logos*] I wrote concerning all the things that Jesus began both to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). And an author of a letter could refer to his instruction in the letter as *logos* (2 Thess 3:14; cf. Heb 13:22).

Oral and Written Texts of Paul’s Teachings

All but one of Paul’s letters were written to churches or to individuals whom he had taught the truths of the gospel in person. In his letters he referred to his recipients’ having heard his gospel messages, and he often reminded them of things he proclaimed when he was with them. In many ways Paul’s oral texts and written texts sought to accomplish similar objectives; he apparently said many of the same things in both. From what we know about oral culture, written texts were not considered to be independent or substantively different from oral texts.

In both of his letters to the church at Thessalonica, Paul stated that he was reiterating his encouragement to live lives worthy of God.

> Finally, brothers, we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus—just as you received from us how you ought to live and please God, as you are living—that you excel in this all the more. (1 Thess 4:1)

> Do you not remember that when I was still with you I was telling you these things? (2 Thess 2:5; cf. 1 Cor 11:2)

> So then, brothers, be steadfast and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either through our *logos* or our [previous] letter. (2 Thess 2:15)

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul took as the starting point the gospel that he had preached orally and personally. He defended it against other "gospels" that were perversions of the one he had declared (Gal 1:4-9). Reminding the Galatians of what he had spoken in their presence, he proclaimed the gospel of grace yet again as he contended for freedom in Christ and warned against being enslaved to the law. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul repeated foundational elements of the gospel that he had already explained when he was with them (1 Cor 11:23; 15:1-3). He also sent Timothy to remind the Corinthians of his way of life in Christ, which matched what he taught everywhere he went (1 Cor 4:17). In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul said that it was not inconvenient for him to repeat things he had said previously (Phil 3:1).[7] Even in writing to the Romans, whom he had not yet visited, Paul reminded them of things they had heard (Rom 15:15).

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul emphasized two things that he apparently had proclaimed in person: "I remind you to set on fire the gift of God that is in you" (2 Tim 1:6); "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, from the seed of David, according to my Gospel" (2 Tim 2:8). Beyond that, Paul told Timothy to take the things he learned (from Paul) and pass them on to others (2 Tim 2:2; 3:14-17). The point was that Timothy was supposed to re-preach what Paul had preached (see proposition 10). There was no hint that Paul expected Timothy to write anything. Timothy was a leader in the church at Ephesus, and since his ministry was local there was no need for him to record Paul's teaching in writing. Expecting Timothy's ministry to be oral, Paul referred to his *hearers* (1 Tim 4:16).

Paul also wrote to Titus, giving instructions similar to those he gave Timothy. Titus was a leader in the churches on the island of Crete, and he functioned as Paul's representative (Tit 1:5; 2:1, 7-8). Paul's purpose in writing to Titus was to emphasize things he had already told him and to counsel him on things to stress in his ministry of encouragement (Tit 1:5; 3:8). As with Timothy, Paul expected Titus to pass along orally the sound doctrine that he had learned from Paul and others.

In addition to emphasizing the similarities between his preaching and writing, Paul expressed in several letters his desire to be present in person rather than to be communicating in writing. He considered his written communication to be in lieu of what he would say in person. In effect, textuality was a tool of his orality. Regarding the people of Galatia, he wished that he were present so he could address the needs of the believers personally (Gal 4:20). He longed to see

the Thessalonians so he could encourage and strengthen the new believers (1 Thess 2:17-18; 3:2, 6, 10). Writing to the Ephesians, Paul said the letter carrier Tychicus would fill them in on everything (Eph 6:21). To Timothy he wrote, “I am writing these things to you—even though I hope to come to you soon—so that if I am delayed you will know the conduct that’s necessary in God’s household” (1 Tim 3:14-15).

The Authority of Paul’s Oral Texts

Paul was completely confident that what he proclaimed orally was the word of God. Even as Jesus made clear that the source of his oral texts was his Father (see proposition 10), Paul often affirmed the divine source of what he preached. To the Romans Paul said that he would not dare to speak of anything except what the Lord had accomplished through him (Rom 15:18). Looking back on his preaching in Corinth he asserted that his *logos* and preaching came from the Spirit (1 Cor 2:4, 10, 13). In his second letter to the Corinthians he mentioned speaking as God’s representative and ambassador with the Lord’s authority (2 Cor 2:17; 5:20; 13:3, 10). He declared to the Galatians that his oral gospel was not manmade but came by revelation of Jesus himself (Gal 1:10-11). To the leaders of the church in Ephesus Paul affirmed that he had proclaimed the “whole will of God” (Acts 20:27). To the Thessalonians he said, “when you received the word of God from us, you did not receive it as the word of men, but as it truly is, the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13). He also told the Thessalonians that his teaching was by the authority of the Lord (1 Thess 4:2). Paul wrote to Timothy that what Timothy had heard from him was sound words (2 Tim 1:13). To Titus he said, “in his own timing [God] revealed his message [*logos*] through the preaching entrusted to me according to the command of God our Savior” (Tit 1:3).[8] Three times Paul said “my gospel,” suggesting that what he preached was the true gospel (Rom 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim 2:8).

In addition to the authority of his teaching, there were important oral sources underlying what Paul proclaimed. Before his conversion he heard Stephen’s explanation of the gospel in his sermon before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1-58; 8:1). Immediately after his conversion Paul was tutored in the faith by Ananias and other disciples in Damascus. And within a few days he was preaching in the synagogues. Later he went to Jerusalem and came under the care of Barnabas and the apostles. He remained in Jerusalem for some time, speaking boldly about

his faith. Subsequently he spent a year with Barnabas ministering in the church in Antioch.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he specifically mentioned two oral texts of which he was a recipient, one regarding the bread and the cup and the other regarding Jesus' death and resurrection (1 Cor 11:23-26; 15:1-5). As Craig Blomberg notes, these were "words remembered by the disciples and widely repeated and perhaps even memorized in the early Christian community."[9] In all of this, Paul was the beneficiary of oral texts that were the basis of the early Christian movement.

A remarkable example of Paul's conviction that oral texts under the guidance of the Holy Spirit were authoritative is what he told the Corinthians (2 Cor 3:7-11). In the context of explaining the differences and similarities between the old and new covenants, Paul acknowledged that the ministry of the old covenant, which was carved in letters on stone, was glorious in its own right. But Paul asks, "How will not the ministry of the Spirit be greater in glory?" (2 Cor 3:8). This emphasis on the significance of ministry apart from written text comes through even stronger in Paul's statement in the immediately preceding context: "You show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor 3:3 ESV; see Is 51:7; Jer 31:33).

Paul's confidence in what he preached was likely also bolstered by what Jesus had said to the disciples.

> In that hour it will be given you what you should say; for you are not the ones speaking but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Mt 10:19-20)
>
> The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and remind you of all the things which I said to you. (Jn 14:26)
>
> When that one, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. (Jn 16:13)[10]

Significantly, as far as Luke was concerned, it was sufficient to report the oral preaching of the word of God. In his record of the first three decades of the church, Luke mentions nothing about letters that Paul or others had written to the churches that had been evangelized.[11] For example, Paul apparently wrote to the

Thessalonians during his eighteen months in Corinth. Luke records the arrival of Timothy in Corinth having come from Macedonia, but he does not make reference to this being the occasion for Paul's letters (Acts 18:5; 1 Thess 3:6). Even more remarkable, Paul had written a letter to the believers in Rome—also probably while in Corinth, though on a later visit—but Luke's account of Paul's arrival in Rome and preaching the kingdom of God records nothing about the letter Paul had sent ahead (Acts 28:16-31). In a culture of orality, written texts may not have been as noteworthy as we would expect from our perspective of textuality. They were not necessarily superior to oral texts.[12]

While Paul made it clear that what he preached was fully inspired and authoritative, he did not make the same claim for what he put in writing. But since his writing was derivative of his teaching and in lieu of his personal presence, he undoubtedly intended his letters to carry similar authority. Note the confidence with which he wrote to the Thessalonians: "If anyone does not obey our teaching [*logos*] in this letter, mark and do not associate with this person so that he may be ashamed" (2 Thess 3:14; cf. 2 Cor 10:10-11).[13]

In sum, Paul considered his oral messages to be a repository of divine truth, and Luke records various examples of people recognizing that to be true (e.g., Paul meeting at Miletus with the elders from the church in Ephesus, Acts 20:17–21:1). Paul proclaimed the counsel of God. It was stamped with divine authority. It was God's message.

Paul probably would have continued proclaiming the gospel only orally, except that some of his hearers were too far away for him to revisit and communicate with them orally. His letters were stop-gap measures until he could get there and speak in person.[14] In effect, Paul's communiqués were surrogates in place of his physical presence. He wrote to reaffirm and to supplement the truth he had previously preached orally. Interestingly (and maybe puzzlingly), Paul did not write letters to groups of believers to whom he had not personally proclaimed the gospel or at least that had not come under his direct influence (except in the case of Romans, and he was sending that letter in advance of his visit).[15]

In many respects, then, it made little difference whether Paul preached something orally or wrote it in a letter. The ultimate purpose was the same. The authority was the same. While written texts of Paul's gospel began to be circulated, they did not take the place of, or supersede, his oral texts. Luke preserves records of Paul's ongoing preaching even though he had already written letters to churches (e.g., Acts 18:23).

Orality in the General Epistles

Many of the elements of orality that are evident in Paul's letters are also present in the general letters. The author of the book of Hebrews emphasizes the importance of paying attention to what had been heard so that no one drifts away (Heb 2:1; see also 3:7, 15-16; 4:2, 7). He also reveals the oral transmission of the words of Jesus through eyewitnesses: "the salvation that was spoken first by the Lord was confirmed to us by the ones who heard him" (Heb 2:3).

James wrote his letter assuming the recipients would be hearers. He tells them to listen to what he is saying (Jas 2:5). He instructs them to accept the implanted word [*logos*] and not only to hear it but also to do it; otherwise it would be like people looking at themselves in a mirror, seeing something that needs attention and then forgetting to do anything about it (Jas 1:21-24).

Peter affirms the authority of those who had previously preached the gospel to his hearers: it was "by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven" (1 Pet 1:12). Peter also instructs his recipients about using their gifts and says that if anyone speaks, it should be "as one speaking the oracles of God" (1 Pet 4:11). John leaves no doubt in his letters about the authority with which he proclaims the truth: "We are from God; the one who knows God listens to us; the one who is not from God does not listen to us" (1 Jn 4:6).

The importance of remembering things previously heard orally is mentioned multiple times (2 Pet 1:12-13; 1 Jn 2:7, 18, 20-21, 24, 27; 2 Jn 5-6). Peter instructs his recipients to recall the "command of our Lord and Savior passed on via the apostles" (2 Pet 3:2); and Jude tells his hearers that they should "recall the words [*rhēmata*] of our Lord Jesus Christ's apostles" (Jude 17). Further, Peter expresses his desire that after his death his recipients would "remember these things" (2 Pet 1:15).

Similar to Paul's thinking, oral texts were considered to be repositories of divine truth. John writes to people whom he says had already heard the truth (1 Jn 2:7, 18, 24; 3:11; 4:3). In order to counter false teachers who claim to have a corner on the truth, John underscores what his listeners already know by saying that they have an anointing of truth (probably echoing what Jesus said about the Spirit of truth guiding followers into all truth; Jn 16:13).

> You have an anointing from the holy one and you all know [this]; I am not writing to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it. . . . The anointing that you received from him remains in you, and you do not need someone to teach you, because his anointing teaches

you concerning all things. (1 Jn 2:20-21, 27)

Finally, though an argument from silence, nowhere in the Epistles—even ones composed in the second half of the first century—is there any reference to written texts of the Gospels. And as noted previously, Luke only mentioned oral texts in the book of Acts. In contrast, Peter acknowledged in his letter that Paul had already written a letter to the same recipients to whom he was writing (2 Pet 3:15-16).

The general epistles confirm what is evident in the rest of the New Testament:

- the words of Jesus were passed along orally
- it was assumed that the recipients of the letters would be hearers
- oral texts had authority
- remembering what had been heard orally was essential
- letters were surrogates for oral communication
- oral texts could adequately preserve truth
- nothing is stated about written texts of the gospel

Orality in the Book of Revelation

The genre of apocalyptic is unique, and the content of the book of Revelation is equally unique. No other New Testament book emphasizes writing and reading like this book. Perhaps it is significant that John apparently wrote Revelation near the end of the first century, by which time textuality was becoming more common in the early church. Nevertheless, similar to the Gospels, the inspired word came to John orally (or in visionary form). The Evangelists record things Jesus said, and John records in the Apocalypse things he heard or saw.

Logos in Revelation fits the pattern of orality in the rest of the New Testament.

> He made it clear, sending the revelation through his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the *word* of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, things which he saw. (Rev 1:1-2)

> Because you have kept my *word* to endure patiently . . . (Rev 3:10)
>
> I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered on account of the *word* of God and on account of the testimony which they kept. (Rev 6:9)
>
> They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the *word* of their testimony. (Rev 12:11)
>
> He said to me, “These *words* are faithful and true.” (Rev 22:6; also 21:5)

On the other hand, in the context of the Apocalypse as a whole, *logos* could refer to texts that were read or heard.

> Blessed is the one who reads and hears the *words* of this prophecy. (Rev 1:3)
>
> Blessed is the one who keeps the *words* of the prophecy of this book. (Rev 22:7; see also 22:9-10)
>
> I testify to everyone who hears the *words* of the prophecy of this book . . . if anyone takes away from the *words* of this book of prophecy, God will take away his portion from the tree of life and from the holy city, the things written in this book. (Rev 22:18-19)

In addition, John was instructed to write: “What you saw, write in a book” (Rev 1:11; also 1:19; 19:9; 21:5); “To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write” (Rev 2:1; the same applies to each of the seven letters in chapters 2–3); “I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying . . . don’t write these things” (Rev 10:4).

The scroll in the right hand of the One on the throne, with writing on the inside and outside—which only the Lion/Lamb was worthy to take, break the seals and open—plays a key role in the book of Revelation (Rev 5:1-10; 6:1 *et passim*). It was a divine message in written form that expressed God’s will that was soon to be carried out (compare the Ten Commandments). The scene abounds with acclamation of the slaughtered Lamb as messianic King, whose servants would become his kingdom and priests.

Conclusion

The oral texts of the life and ministry of Jesus were told and retold hundreds and probably thousands of times in the history of the church. It was great news to proclaim, and in response thousands became part of the new movement. Without the oral texts, there would have been no converts. Like water for creatures of the sea or air for creatures of the earth, without the gospel there would have been no "new creatures" (2 Cor 5:17 KJV). The message of the gospel was the life-giving breath of the new way of life.

If someone from another culture could have asked the early Christians why they didn't record the good news in written form, the response might have been —with puzzled looks on their faces—Why should we? Is the point to put the words on pieces of papyrus, or to write them in our minds and on our hearts? Do you think our priority should be writing them down in order to read them aloud in our gatherings, rather than going to our friends and neighbors and sharing the good news?

What the early Christians did made perfect sense to them, whether or not it does to us. Perhaps they had the better idea. There's no evidence that they were failing to do something God wanted them to do.

Neither Jesus nor Paul seemed to think there was any urgency to record truth in written form. Only when it became important to communicate with communities of believers at a distance did Paul undertake writing letters. Paul's focus was not writing but preaching. Like Jesus, he was an itinerant preacher with a transforming message to proclaim. He primarily communicated truth in oral forms, and his hearers grasped the truth by aural means. Also like Jesus, Paul passed the mantle on to followers so they would continue to preach the truth orally.

In the general epistles, we find no evidence that written texts began to replace oral texts. Records of things Jesus said were still being passed along orally. Oral texts were fully authoritative and were repositories of divine truth. Proclaiming the truth orally, along with people remembering what they heard, continued to be the basis of the church's preservation of truth, propagation of the gospel and resistance to false teaching.

We have now come to the close of the New Testament, and for the most part the culture was still oral. Little had changed since Jesus himself taught only orally. But what happened next? How long did orality continue to be the dominant mode of transmission of the gospel message? How were the written texts of the Gospels and letters copied and disseminated? These questions will be

taken up in the next chapter.

Proposition 13

Exact Wording Was Not Necessary to Preserve and Transmit Reliable Representations of Inspired Truth

An unparalleled turning point in the history of Western civilization was two inventions: movable type and the printing press.[1] But much more than a mechanical revolution, the inventions produced a revolution in the culture of texts.[2] Printed texts replaced manuscripts; fixed texts replaced fluid texts; reading replaced hearing; individualism replaced communalism; and so forth. It was a cosmic transformation that would sweep across Western civilization.[3] People under the influence of print culture would never conceive of texts the same way again. This new world has been dubbed the "Gutenberg Galaxy."[4]

Although Johannes Gutenberg was a silversmith, he seized the opportunity to produce books in mass quantity and to do so relatively cheaply. He began by carving a letter of the alphabet into a soft metal such as bronze. That was his die, and around that he poured hot lead. When it cooled, he removed the bronze die, leaving a lead mold. Into that he poured a hot metal alloy. When that cooled, he removed the lead mold. The result was a letter in durable metal that could be used over and over again.

But that was only part of the process. He then aligned all the letters needed for a page of text in a single frame. Justifying the right margins was important, so he placed tiny pieces of lead between letters to lengthen a short line of text to match the lines above and below. With all the letters securely in place, he inked the letters using rollers and then placed a piece of paper on top of the "bed" of letters. Finally, he pressed the paper down on the bed using a flat surface and a worm screw to apply pressure. Thus, Gutenberg could produce multiple copies of the same page before resetting his type and pressing multiple copies of the next page of the book in production. The printing press was literally a process of pressing.

Before the invention of printing, other than woodcuts, books were manuscripts, painstakingly copied by scribes. It was a tried and true method that had been practiced for over two thousand years. In due time, however, the printing press replaced that custom—but for some notable exceptions, such as

Jewish scribes continuing to make handwritten copies of the Torah or the recent handwritten copy of the Bible, *The St. John's Bible*.[5]

In order to be sensitive to the implications of print culture and ways that the modern cognitive environment hinders Westerners from appreciating manuscript culture, this chapter seeks to pay close attention to the nature of handwritten texts. In previous chapters we have found that the authors and early hearers of the New Testament lived in an oral culture. But eventually Christians began inscribing their oral texts on papyrus and parchment. The questions are, How did written forms differ from oral forms? How different was the transmission and preservation of written texts vis-à-vis oral texts? How do we account for variants in written texts?

We will examine the evidence found in thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament. That will lead us to implications regarding oral texts being recorded in written form. In particular, we want to understand the nature of the biblical text after it was committed to writing but before it came under the influence of Gutenberg's Galaxy.

Manuscripts of the New Testament

The evidence of handwritten copies of the New Testament is broad and rich. Surpassing the state of preservation of any other ancient literature by more than one hundred fold, some 5,800 manuscripts that preserve portions of the Greek New Testament have been discovered to date, with more coming to light every year.[6] The recovery of these witnesses depends on papyrus and parchment surviving the natural processes of decay across hundreds of years and on the manuscripts being discovered by knowledgeable people. Thousands of manuscripts did not survive, while some that did survive were not recognized for their importance and were reportedly used as kindling to start fires.

In addition to manuscripts in Greek, the number of handwritten copies of the New Testament translated into other languages (such as Latin, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Gothic) easily totals 9,000. And further, tens of thousands of quotations of the New Testament occur in the church fathers. If anyone has doubt about the preservation of the text of the New Testament, this should bolster their faith.

It would be wonderful if someone had the vision and resources to construct a long wall of black granite panels and to inscribe on the wall the entire text of the

New Testament. It could be dedicated to the thousands of scribes who faithfully and laboriously copied the inspired words of the New Testament. The wall would need to be at least twice as long as the Vietnam War Memorial. In comparison to the 140 panels of the memorial that record the names of 58,000 men and women who gave their lives or remain missing from the war in Vietnam, the New Testament consists of approximately 140,000 words (in Greek). It would be amazing to walk along a New Testament wall like that, meditating on the words of Scripture and reflecting on the scribes who conscientiously inscribed copies of the New Testament.

But there's another side to the story. None of the scribes copied their texts perfectly. Among the thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament, no two manuscripts have been found to match word for word. While no one has ever attempted this, it's estimated that a compilation of every difference in every manuscript would result in a total of upwards of 300,000 variants.[7]

Now imagine someone putting a Post-it note for each variant on the black granite panels of the wall of the New Testament. What would the result be? Would the message of the New Testament be overshadowed by all the Post-it notes? Would we be unable to see what the New Testament said because we couldn't make out what the exact words were?

Variants in the Text of the New Testament

The excessive number of variants in Scripture can be disconcerting and alarming. As a result, some people have lost faith in the Bible as God's inspired Word. So understanding the nature of the manuscripts of the New Testament is essential. It may be counterintuitive to how people in Gutenberg's Galaxy think, but there are legitimate reasons for the variants.

- Copyists and scribes were subject to the mistakes any human would make in copying text from one papyrus or parchment to another, no matter how diligent they were. Whether scribe (with professional training) or copyist (with less training), making duplicates of manuscripts hour by hour was tedious work. There were numerous challenges, especially in the earliest days of copying: the way the text was laid out on the page (no division between words, no paragraphs, no punctuation, no lowercase/uppercase letters), limited lighting, poor eyesight, fatigue and so forth.[8]

- To copy a text, scribes most likely read aloud a short portion of the exemplar (the text being copied) in order to place those words in short-term memory. Then with quill in hand, they recalled from memory the words of the exemplar and again spoke them aloud as they inscribed the words on the papyrus or parchment. In this way, copying involved a succession of senses: seeing, speaking and hearing the words of the exemplar; then remembering and repeating the spoken sounds/words as scribes wrote and viewed the words on the papyrus/parchment; and finally reviewing what they had copied by seeing, speaking and hearing the words one more time.
- In some cases, multiple copies of a manuscript were made simultaneously as a spokesperson read a manuscript aloud while a room full of scribes each wrote down what they heard. The oral dimension of this mass production (in a room known as a scriptorium) led to variants being more frequent.
- Given the oral dimension of copying texts, certain kinds of variants were unavoidable. Homonyms in Greek sounded the same in scribes' ears, though different in meaning, and scribes sometimes wrote the wrong word. In the process of scribes' placing in their minds a portion of text and then inscribing it, they easily substituted a synonym for the actual word in the exemplar. Greek word order was flexible, and since the meaning was essentially the same, scribes might remember the sense and not the exact word order. Phraseology that appeared elsewhere in a text could influence what scribes wrote in a different place in the manuscript, leading to harmonizations. And so forth.
- Copies of copies of manuscripts—like compound investing—generated compound frequencies of variants. The more copies, the more Post-its on the wall. But what other option was there?
- Recognizing the possibility of errors in manuscripts from which they were copying, scribes sought to avoid repeating previous mistakes. Unfortunately, without any way to double check an original, the corrections they made were not always correct. But from their perspective, they actually did have an "original." They had undoubtedly heard the stories many times over, and they already knew what the manuscripts they were copying should say. So they made the appropriate

corrections on their copies.

- Some variants resulted from intentional changes, for example, by orthodox scribes in order to bring the text into line with what they understood the message of the New Testament to be.[9] In their minds this was a service to the community, not an injustice. They were preserving truth, not destroying it.[10] Further, scribal changes were not wholesale misrepresentation of the meaning of the text being copied. The scribes were not bogeymen.[11]
- Variants appear more frequently in manuscripts when quoting things Jesus said than when narrating things Jesus did. The Lord's Prayer and what Jesus said about marriage and adultery are good examples.[12] Perhaps the counterintuitive nature of things Jesus said led to editorial interpretations as scribes sought to make sense of his statements for their hearers.
- The majority of the major variants were the result of the first one hundred years or so of copying manuscripts. After that, readings in manuscripts became more standardized. "The story of the text from the late first or early second to the fifth century or so is in general the story of a progression from a relatively undisciplined to a relatively more disciplined transmission of the text, with relative stability of textual traditions or Textforms being one consequence of that progression."[13] Over time scribal practices introduced fewer additional variants.
- Among the first copyists and scribes there is no evidence that anybody sought to preserve the earliest forms of manuscripts. Scribes did not have the luxury of choosing from multiple copies of a text which one they wanted to copy.
- While it is common to refer to "original" texts of the books of the New Testament, a single original autograph may have been a misnomer in certain cases.[14] Evidence suggests that Mark and Romans, for example, existed in shorter and longer forms.[15] The book of Acts may have had two forms, since two textual streams are extant. The Gospels had additional sayings or stories of Jesus attached to earlier editions, such as the woman taken in adultery, which later became a part of John's Gospel (Jn 8).

We will offer additional explanation below for the presence of variants in manuscripts of the New Testament, but it's important to note here that out of all the variants, very few make any significant doctrinal difference. Many of the variants are simply different ways to spell words, different grammatical cases and numbers, different prepositions, different choices of wording and so forth.

Bart Ehrman overstates the case when he says that "it's hard to know what the words of the New Testament mean if you don't know what the words were." In another context he more accurately admits that most variants "don't matter for anything. They are absolutely irrelevant, immaterial, unimportant."[16] Daniel Wallace says, "Less than 1 percent of the differences are both meaningful and viable."[17] Craig Blomberg concludes that only about four hundred variants have significant bearing on the meaning of passages in the New Testament.[18] In other words, the message of the New Testament would be visible through the Post-it notes as if they were not even there. The manuscripts—despite differences in wording—preserve the true message of the text.

Nevertheless, scholars (textual critics) who closely study the manuscripts of the New Testament have been motivated for several hundred years by one primary objective and have operated on the basis of one primary premise. The standard goal of textual criticism has been to determine by all possible means what the exact wording of the New Testament was in every verse as first written. In this view, the exact words are essential; every variant does matter. And the premise of textual critics is that the text of the New Testament that was available when Bibles were first printed did not provide an adequate witness for the wording of the New Testament. In other words, there was simply too much variation. So the priority of textual critics has been to obtain the best manuscripts (or to identify the textual traditions that were copied the least frequently) in order to ascertain the most likely original readings among all the variants.

A more recent and more nuanced objective of textual criticism, however, is evident in Juan Hernández's statement:

> The recovery of the initial text remains an integral part of the text-critical task. The fact that our texts may not represent the very wording of the author in every respect, however, does not imply textual chaos. The textual tradition is stable *en masse*. Even the well-known exceptions, however, are no longer dismissed as merely inauthentic. Contested episodes—such as the story of the woman caught in adultery or the multiple endings of Mark—are valued as witnesses to the church's

> ongoing engagement with its traditions. Even the later Byzantine tradition is now represented by a diplomatic edition of the Greek NT for the Orthodox Church. Textual variation, in other words, is the hallmark of a living tradition. Establishing the initial text is an essential but by no means final step in the textual criticism of the Gospels.[19]

Implications of Manuscript Culture

In proposition 6 we underscored some of the major differences between orality and textuality. But textuality needs to be further subdivided between manuscript culture and print culture. The two forms of textuality can be markedly different, and delving into the differences is essential for considering the transmission of texts of the New Testament.

But we are faced with two problems. For moderns to understand ancient manuscript culture we must reorient our thinking to a culture very different from our own. And second, without firsthand reports of how ancient manuscript culture functioned, we must infer certain matters. So the following description draws from evidence cited above about the nature of biblical manuscripts, builds on inferences from the oral culture of the New Testament as summarized in previous chapters and borrows from the conclusions of numerous scholars, especially as summarized by Alan Kirk.[20] The viability of this reconstruction rests on whether it is the best explanation for the evidence at hand.

1. Speaking, hearing and remembering texts were fundamental for communities preserving and transmitting oral texts, and that paved the way for written texts. The written texts had a specific purpose beyond what an oral text was able to accomplish.

    - The stories and traditions that defined a community were told and retold. As members of the community heard and reheard the oral texts, they retained the stories and then reproduced the stories from memory as they passed them on to the next generation.

    - Telling and hearing the stories time and time again allowed the communities to interpret, apply and cement the values implicit in

the traditions deep within the consciousness of the hearers. Written texts were not necessary to do that.

- Scribes within a community heard the same oral texts, perhaps even performed them themselves, and then, based on memory, recorded the oral texts in written form. Oral repetition, retention and transmission were the birth canal of written texts.

- Scribes who made initial written copies of a community's oral texts were not copyists per se; perhaps *replicators* would be an appropriate designation, or *tradents*. They were responsible for transmitting the traditions. Based on their acquaintance with the oral texts of the community, they crafted written versions that would have been fully recognizable to (and probably subject to the approval of) the community. If we refer to scribes who functioned in this way as *authors*, which is commonly done, we need to recognize that they were not authors in the modern sense of authorship.

- The primary function of recording oral texts in written form was for the sake of other communities. A community in one location could share their oral texts with another community in another locale via written texts. Communities sent written versions of their oral texts so those written texts could be performed as oral texts in other communities (see Col 4:16).

- Once oral texts were recorded in writing, written texts did not immediately replace the oral texts. Even with versions of oral texts committed to writing, communities continued to perform their oral texts within their own communities.[21] The communities considered their oral texts to be sufficient for preserving and transmitting their traditions.

2. Oral culture and manuscript culture overlapped substantially with the result that handwritten and oral texts, though different media, functioned in similar ways.

    - Written texts were shaped by their oral origins. They began as

oral texts and were derived from oral texts. Scribes preserved the marks of orality in inscribed forms, which meant the differences between the two were almost negligible.

- Written texts were primarily intended for oral performance.[22] Spokespersons would either read the texts aloud or memorize and recite them. The delivery was oral and the reception aural.

- In manuscript culture the instinctive way that people thought about texts was hearing them, not reading them. Even for those who could read a text, in most cases they heard the text, either as someone else performed it or as they themselves read it aloud.

- In instances when authors created original texts, they generally did not compose a document in the process of writing; their composition began in oral form. As authors developed ideas, they communicated those thoughts orally at first, often repeating the message in different settings. As communities heard the messages, responded to them and asked questions, authors' ideas about what to say and how to say it were shaped so that their written versions were partly a product of interactive oral presentations.

3. People like us, under the spell of print culture, conceive of texts in very different ways. Reading texts becomes the primary way texts are known, while hearing texts becomes secondary.

    - Because people can read printed texts individually, there is less need for a community to tell their traditions orally. Which means there is less need to retain texts in memory, since written texts preserve the traditions. In print culture one can readily refer to a documentary record of traditions.

    - The location of knowledge shifts from what is implanted in the mind through the senses to what is inscribed by hand on written texts.[23] In print culture what one *knows* becomes linked to what is written, either what one has read and can go back to, or what one has recorded in notes in order to recall what was learned. People

of print culture can *know* more, but they may *know* it less well.

- Printed texts entail fixed wording so that no matter when and where someone encounters the text, it is exactly the same words. This fixity of texts leads to the conclusion that exact wording is essential for texts to communicate the same meaning for all readers.

- Readers assume that what they see on a printed page is word for word what an author wrote. If there were editors who helped to shape what an author wrote, that's not supposed to be obvious, and the assumption of most readers is that the author is ultimately responsible for what was written.

- Written records of what someone said become the only sure way to know what was stated. Print culture assumes that if oral culture did not preserve someone's exact words, then what that person said cannot be known for certain.

- Seeing words on a page and reading them—versus only hearing them—is a print mode of apprehending meaning. Advantages of hearing texts are often overlooked by people of print culture; the perception is that not being able to lay eyes on the exact words in printed forms of the text hinders understanding.

Summing up, if we imagine a continuum from oral culture to print culture, manuscript culture was closer to oral culture and more distant from print culture. Handwritten texts were essentially oral texts that had been inscribed in writing. They were ancillary, not primary; surrogates, not principals; derivative, not superlative.

Nor did manuscript culture consider handwritten texts to be an advancement beyond oral texts; they were an extension, not a replacement. Writing was a tool of orality. Texts continued to be embodied in speech. In communities that did not already have the desired oral traditions available in other communities, written texts took the place of oral texts.

Returning to the problem of variants, in the cognitive environment of manuscript culture differences in wording were not viewed as putting truth at risk. A certain amount of variation (according to the limits of a community) was

not an issue in oral culture, and the same was true for manuscript culture. Variants were simply endemic to oral cultures as their oral texts took form, and to manuscript cultures as their written texts took form. Variants were evident among the different oral texts of the Gospels (see proposition 11), and they were evident among the different written texts as passed on by the Christian community. As long as texts—whether oral or written—reliably represented the meaning, no harm no foul.

It's especially important to recognize that with all the centuries of copying manuscripts and all the variants in those manuscripts there is no aspect of theology seriously in doubt. In recent centuries, even though English translations such as the King James Version did not have the advantage of earlier manuscripts discovered more recently, there have been no changes in theology resulting from newer English translations. In this respect, the thousands of variants have not amounted to a hill of beans.

Conclusion

The world of the New Testament was both an oral and manuscript culture with little to differentiate between the two. It was a cognitive environment so different from our own that if we only understand that culture through the lens of print culture, it's almost impossible to appreciate its distinctive worldview. There are many implications. But the fundamental question for evangelicals is, Which worldview defines our theology of Scripture? Manuscript or print culture?

Unavoidably, Western Christians view the issue of inspiration from the cognitive environment of print culture. We are dyed-in-the-wool inhabitants of the Gutenberg Galaxy. We like the idea of a bed of letters that can produce the exact same page of text every time a piece of paper is pressed upon it. We like to think that scribes could make copies with almost the same exactitude as mechanical printing. An inadvertent slip here or there might be acceptable, but any more than that we think correctors should have fixed (or God should have prevented).

Steeped in print culture, much of what we think about biblical revelation is dependent on being able to refer to the written words on the pages of Scripture. We dutifully carry our Bibles to church; some of us read them daily; a few memorize verses. But for the most part, we need to be able to look up exactly what the text says. It's especially important that we can read the very words that

Jesus spoke or Paul wrote. Some are inclined to think that for Scripture to speak truthfully, exact wording is required.[24] Some expect a fixity of texts and an objectivity of terms.[25]

Further, we're uncomfortable with variants: they are roadblocks to the objective knowledge we seek. And faced with a large number of variants, we throw up our hands in despair. Our only recourse is to concede that we may not have the exact wording in every case, but we are sure that there were originals that did have the exact words. It may be unlikely that we will ever find such originals, but on the assumption that they existed—and that there was a specific fixed word in every spot—we engage in Herculean efforts to determine what the most likely exact wording would have been in the hypothetical originals.

But the question we must face is, Does our print-culture framework adequately account for the evidence at hand, or does a manuscript-culture framework make more sense? If the latter, our thinking may need an extreme makeover.

Even though we have thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament, the extent of the variants suggests we cannot be sure about the precise wording in many places. Perhaps we should conclude that if it did not obviate early Christians' confidence in the message of Scripture, it should not stand in the way of ours. Further, the variation in details as the stories were passed along in communities, as scribes recorded those stories in writing and as copyists duplicated them may mean that there never was a single, original word in every spot. If that didn't hinder early Christians' trust in the text of Scripture, it shouldn't ours either.

This makes the common notion that variants are mistakes or corruptions of manuscripts a case of worldview prejudice.[26] It's judging manuscript culture by the standards of print culture. Holmes states that "every manuscript, every textual tradition, every Textform bears within it the evidence of corruption."[27] Even Bruce Metzger's classic text is corrupted by having the word *corruption* in the subtitle.[28] If there were bogeymen scribes by the standards of their society, then they truly were corrupting the text. If their work was honorable within their culture and its values, then we ought to honor them accordingly.

It seems clear that being scrupulously diligent about exactitude in transmitting oral and written texts was simply not practiced by early Christians.[29] David Parker observes, "Early Christians were used to the uncertainty of manuscript copies that differed from each other. They lived in fact in a textually rich world in which, if they consulted different copies, they would

find different wordings."[30] He concludes that it is actually people of print culture who live in an impoverished textual world.

Of these two worldviews, oral-manuscript culture or print culture, the question is, Which more accurately accounts for how the New Testament came into being? Though it may appear to turn our world upside down, the correct conclusion is that exacting detail and precise wording were not necessary to preserve and transmit the truths of Scripture.

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Stepping Back and Summing Up

How the Composition of the New Testament May Be Understood Differently in Light of What Is Known of Ancient Literary Culture

Standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, straining to see its depths and the extent of its lengths, one may wonder if this oddity of planetary formation is explainable. If nothing else, the seriously understated yet rational conclusion might be, “Something happened here.”

The canyon inspires awe, even if the processes entailed in its origins are a lost world. No one recorded anything about its formation (if anyone was there to observe it), so scientists descend into its depths and examine every feature for evidence that may help to reconstruct the processes that produced this wonder of the world.

Peering into the sixty-six books of the Bible, written across centuries by diverse authors, there is no doubt that something special happened here. Much can and ought to be said about this amazing collection of books. We can see the canon, but we would like to know more about how it came to be. We have the product. What can we uncover about the process?

Beginning in proposition 5, we have been exploring the literary culture of the Greco-Roman-Jewish world, and in light of that, the literary culture of the New Testament. It’s a remarkable story. Even though for a decade or more after Jesus’ earthly ministry the texts of the good news were only oral, the message came through loud and clear. Lives were transformed.

But there are significant ways that the story of the New Testament began in the Old Testament. Neither testament makes complete sense standing alone. Our particular interest here is how the formation of the Old Testament sheds light on the processes involved in the creation of the New Testament.

So in this chapter we are doing two things. We are offering a summary of the material gathered in preceding chapters on the formation of the New Testament. Then we will consider evidence from the composition and transmission of the Old Testament and how it pertains to the New Testament. If the Old Testament was composed and transmitted in certain ways, it’s worth considering whether

the New Testament came together in similar ways.

For some Christians, seeking to understand the production of the New Testament may seem unnecessary. The essential issue is the final product and *its* inspiration. According to that frame of mind, if the written words of Scripture are inspired, why does it matter how they came to be? But the two issues are not as easily separated as one might think. Process determines much about product. Peter, for example, discusses the process as part of his affirmation of the product. He declares that Scripture was not of human creation but was the product of "men being moved by the Holy Spirit and speaking from God" (2 Pet 1:21). Peter's focus was the oral precursor to written Scripture. (For further discussion, see proposition 18.) So it is important that we give careful thought to process.

Summary of the Formation of the New Testament

Written texts in the world of the New Testament took form in a culture that was both oral and communal. Although genres like poetry, history and philosophy would eventually be recorded in written form, they were oral first. Since the majority of the population only engaged with texts and traditions aurally, oral texts were especially appropriate. Gradually, however, committing texts to writing became common. But orality and textuality—though differences existed between the two—were essentially siblings. We can get a sense of that by reviewing how oral and written texts were composed.

Texts typically came into being as oral presentations. That is, storytellers and speakers formed in their minds the content they wanted to communicate along with the words to express the content, often building on what someone before them had communicated. It was a communal process as leaders of a community told and retold the stories important to the group's identity. Repetition and memory were indispensable in the culture of oral transmission.

Oral texts were "published" in performance. The primary intent of oral texts was performance, and in many cases the only intent. Presentations were an act of preserving the oral documents and making them available to a wider audience. Written texts were not necessary to publish a text.

Once oral texts were inscribed in written form, little changed. The written texts continued to be performed in communities as if they were oral texts. And written texts did not supplant oral texts; oral and written forms could have equal place, like brother and sister. Since both were performed orally and received

aurally, there was little distinction between them. Rarely if ever did an author write thinking his audience would read his written text; he expected them to hear it. Reading texts privately—common in modern culture—was rare in ancient culture.

The performers of texts, whether the texts were oral or written, played a principal role in the reception of the texts by the hearers. What hearers understood from a presentation depended in part on the reader/performer, for every performance included some measure of interpretation. Performers who prepared well were able to present a text more effectively.

In the absence of written sources, authors depended on what they could learn by hearing. Historians acknowledged that they were reliant on oral sources; philosophers only put their philosophical principles into writing after they had worked them out in oral discourses; and the written records of Jesus' words were based on his oral communication, often in dialogue with his disciples and opponents. Without the oral texts composed and preserved by various communities, written texts would have been very different, if they would have existed at all.

Ancient historians recognized that variations were unavoidable when drawing from oral sources, and without scripts of speeches they reconstructed what speakers likely said, though the style of the author shows through in the speeches. But these issues did not negate the value of writing history nor impinge on the authors' accomplishing their purposes.

All of this points to a significant thesis: oral and communal culture is more than background to supplement our understanding of ancient texts; it is foreground. Orality is fundamentally a different worldview. If we fail to appreciate ancient communicative processes and do not make room for the uniqueness of oral culture, then we put our understanding of ancient texts in jeopardy. Since orality is counterintuitive to the modern worldview of print culture, most of us will continue to find it difficult to comprehend all the implications.

As we might not have expected, Jesus and his followers were completely in sync with the oral dimensions of their culture. Neither he nor they cut against the grain of orality. Jesus embraced the cognitive environment, using—like philosophers and rabbis—oral texts rather than written. His message was radical; his method of communicating was routine. The importance of his message did not require that it be written down, either by him or by his disciples.

Although Jesus left behind only oral texts, his message was no less

authoritative. He affirmed the divine source of his speech and the permanence of his words. He empowered his disciples to continue proclaiming the oral forms of the gospel, and Luke records in the book of Acts that his followers did as instructed. Authority did not begin in written text, nor is it clear from what's stated in the New Testament that its authority would eventually culminate in written text, though in retrospect, under divine guidance it did.

A characteristic of oral culture was the recognition that exact wording was rarely possible and usually unnecessary to represent truth reliably. Variants were intrinsic in the transmission of oral texts. This was not a case of misrepresenting the truth, because the truthfulness of oral texts was important to the identity of communities and the preservation of their values.

The variants that appear among the Gospels are witness to the flexibility in the transmission process. The essence was preserved, though precise wording and fixed details may not have been. The variants that appear in the early manuscripts of the New Testament also attest to the Christian community's acceptance of variation within the records of Jesus' life and ministry. Whether oral or written, the texts preserved what Jesus said and did.

The core value of the New Testament pertaining to communication was orality, not textuality. Throughout the Gospels, Acts and Letters, the focus was oral texts. Accounts of the words and deeds of Jesus were probably told and retold thousands of times in hundreds of communities in the first century. Though on the surface it may seem that writing letters constituted a significant shift away from orality and toward textuality, the letters themselves demonstrate the opposite. Oral texts are mentioned frequently, and letters were in lieu of oral communication.

When and how the oral texts of the Gospels and Acts were committed to writing is a lost world. It was probably a gradual process, with various people involved in turning oral texts into written ones. As is suggested by the evidence from early manuscripts, even when initial written texts of the Gospels were in existence, what copyists knew from oral texts influenced how they made copies of written texts.

The Transmission of the Old Testament

For further insights into how the New Testament was produced, it will be helpful to follow the path of the Old Testament through its first translation, then along

the course of scribes copying it, and eventually into the New Testament. Exploring these precedents will be spadework in preparation for a clearer understanding of the transmission of the New Testament.

Septuagint. The Septuagint was the first translation of the Old Testament into another language. (It was actually the first translation anywhere in the world of any literary work of similar scope.) With the broad influence of Greek culture and language—typified especially by the city of Alexandria, Egypt, and its library—and with the large population of Jews in the city, it seems fitting for Alexandria to be the location where the Greek translation of the Old Testament was completed. Although we cannot be sure about the place and date (possibly spanning the third to the first centuries B.C.), the Septuagint's significance can hardly be overstated.[1]

This Greek translation is useful in studying the Bible, especially because it antedates other surviving copies of the Hebrew Scriptures. But being a translation, and with the translators' inconsistent work of translation, it's often difficult to back-translate from Greek into Hebrew in hopes of determining exactly what the Hebrew text behind the Septuagint actually said.

For our purposes, the freedom of the translators in transferring the meaning of the Hebrew (and Aramaic) text into Greek is the primary issue. We would not consider it inappropriate if some translators sought to preserve as much of the style of the Hebrew wording as possible, and others emphasized presenting the meaning in Greek as clearly as possible. Differences in philosophy of translation among different translators are expected. But the situation is more complex than that.

There are numerous examples of translators doing more than translation. They took it upon themselves to express in the Greek translation slightly different ideas than were in the Hebrew text. Their tendency was to translate according to what they thought the text should say. After all, the Hebrew texts before them had presumably been copied many times across many years and were not perfectly preserved.

Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva suggest several reasons why translators introduced interpretive elements into their translations.[2] First, the immersion of the translators in the oral traditions of their Jewish communities influenced how they translated; they had heard the stories, poetry and prophecy of the Old Testament recited many times, and their memory of the oral texts could carry as much weight as what they found in the written text from which they were translating. Second, the translators' understanding of theology, such as

anthropomorphic descriptions of God, shaped how they understood the meaning of the Hebrew and therefore how they rendered it in Greek; the wording they chose for their translations reflected their specific theological viewpoints. Third, they updated what was in the Hebrew text so that it would be more understandable and applicable to the issues of their day; they sought to make the translation more contemporary and relevant to the needs of their audience. Bruce Waltke refers to the translators as "innovators."[3]

We may stand aghast, thinking that the translators were perverting the purity of divine truth. But that would be unfair; they were not wolves in sheep's clothing. (Note the observations in proposition 10 about current practices of translators and publishers in accommodating the Bible's ancient dimensions in modern Bibles.) In the cognitive environment of ancient oral culture, what the translators did was acceptable and legitimate. If we question that conclusion—because it's contrary to our thinking—we may need to recall that their translation became the Bible of the early Christians and the first choice for quotations in the New Testament (see below).

But there's another issue to note about the Septuagint. The process of transmission led to multiple forms of the Greek text and many variants. Similar to the New Testament, thousands of scribes passing along thousands of manuscripts resulted in numerous uncertainties about the precise wording in many verses. Jobes and Silva sum up the matter: "The final, extant form of the Greek version of every biblical book is an amalgam of many changes made to the original text for many reasons by many hands over many centuries."[4]

Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls, famously discovered in hillside caves above the Dead Sea beginning in 1947, consist of more than 25,000 fragments remaining from nearly 900 scrolls belonging to a Jewish sectarian group (possibly Essenes). The community existed from about 150 B.C. until shortly before A.D. 70. More than 200 of their scrolls contained portions of the Old Testament and the apocrypha, while more than 650 scrolls recorded the Qumran community's own writings, including prayers, hymns, legal texts, rules and commentaries on various biblical texts.[5]

The Qumran community's efforts in preserving the texts of Scripture and of their community are extraordinary. But many of the biblical manuscripts found at Qumran were actually not copied there. They came from earlier time periods and from other locations.[6] So the Dead Sea Scrolls provide a window into a wider Jewish context of copying and transmitting the Hebrew Scriptures.

While appreciating the value of the Qumran scrolls as a witness to the text of

the Old Testament, we must also acknowledge the extent of variants in the scrolls. Some manuscripts match closely what is known of the same texts from other sources, while not a few give evidence of revision or expansion. It's apparent that multiple textual traditions were preserved among the scrolls, especially in the case of Samuel and Jeremiah. Even manuscripts of the Pentateuch have insertions, deletions, rearrangement and paraphrasing. As Waltke notes, the texts being copied at this stage of transmission were not fixed; there was a scribal tendency to revise texts as they copied them.[7]

> While some scribes simply copied what was in front of them as exactly as possible, many others felt free to introduce deliberate changes of various kinds into the text. . . . The presence of such a variety of text types at a single location . . . suggests that the members of that community, who otherwise appear to have been quite rigid in their practice of their particular version of Judaism, do not seem to have been particularly troubled by discrepancies in biblical manuscripts.[8]

In the centuries following the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish scribes became increasingly focused on copying manuscripts as they received them, leading up to the work of the Masoretes (sixth to ninth centuries A.D.). The Masoretes were the most careful of any ancient copyists in transmitting Scripture. But until that point, as Eugene Ulrich notes, "small additions, omissions, and rearrangements are *characteristic* of the biblical text throughout its history up to the second century C.E."[9] Hence, the changes in copying procedures introduced by the Masoretes earned them a wide reputation, and as a result their manuscripts (dated to the ninth to eleventh centuries) have been the basis for the majority of modern Bibles. But the Masoretic manuscripts could only be as good as the manuscripts that were passed down to them.

Before proceeding, we should pause and ask, Is the trustworthiness of the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls compromised by interpretive additions and variants that translators and scribes introduced into the texts? Or—against all logic, unless we understand their logic—is it possible that the additions actually enhanced the traditions being passed down? The answer depends on which cultural lens we are using. If our modern sensitivities and expectation of exact wording control our thinking—and admittedly it's difficult not to think this way—then we are likely to despair because the translators/scribes did not precisely preserve the exact words.

On the other hand, if we put ourselves in the sandals of people immersed in

ancient oral culture—who had confidence in faithful leaders of their communities to pass along the text in the best form possible—it probably wasn't an issue. Only if the truth were invalidated by too much variation (an unlikely occurrence) would there be reason to question the trustworthiness of the texts. Translators and scribes were accountable to the communities they served by their labors of translating and copying. Quoting Waltke, "Scribes of this era were still the authorized revisers of the text and not just copyists. They continued to expand portions of the OT and to alter it to such an extent that their production might easily be considered as distinct literary editions rather than as copies."[10]

New Testament use of the Old Testament. We come then to a third phase of the transmission of the Old Testament, the quotations of the Old Testament in the New. While a goldmine for understanding the New Testament, the quotations are equally a minefield of interpretive challenges. To be sure, the Old Testament was an authoritative and indispensable source for the presentation of the gospel message, since the truths of the old covenant laid the groundwork for the progressive development of divine revelation. The Gospels in particular show that Jesus carefully interpreted the Old Testament—if not clarified its true meaning—and he certainly fulfilled it. Further, the logical arguments in the letters of Paul, Peter and others were often dependent on wording from the Old Testament.[11]

But determining what the sources were for the quotations of the Old Testament, along with comprehending the significance of the quotations, has posed many problems for New Testament scholars. To modern readers it would appear that there might have been tension in the minds of New Testament authors when citing the Old Testament. Would it be best for them to provide a fresh translation of the appropriate verses from the Hebrew? Adding to the complexity, it's likely that there were multiple text traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures at the time of the New Testament.[12] Or would quoting from a version of the Septuagint be better? Would paraphrasing Old Testament verses be the safer route? Apparently not feeling the tension we would expect, the New Testament authors did all of the above and more.[13]

In the case of Paul, his quotations seem to match the Septuagint more often than the Hebrew text. But even more frequently, neither the Septuagint nor the Hebrew text seems to be his source. Perhaps he recalled verses from memory, or adapted a verse for the point he was making, or paraphrased a verse. As Moisés Silva sums up the situation: "Certainly the apostle feels no compulsion in every instance to reproduce texts exactly."[14] Similarly, Jesus' quotations could be

“against the reading of the MT or any known Targum,” providing “Jesus with both the wording and the application he makes,” states Richard Longenecker.[15] One of the thorniest problems is when a New Testament author says he is quoting from one place in the Old Testament and actually quotes from somewhere else (e.g., Mk 1:2; Jn 10:34).

Part of the issue may be that Jesus and the apostles were not quoting from written texts of the Old Testament but from oral texts. In a culture where texts were heard over and over again, and in lieu of having personal copies of written texts, hearers’ memories could retain much of what was heard. Since oral texts were not clearly delineated from written ones and were often seen to be nearly one and the same, quoting an oral text from memory was just as valid as checking a manuscript. In other words, it was not essential to cite a text word for word.

So what do we make of the quotations of the Old Testament in the New Testament? The quotations are always presented in the New Testament as unquestionably authoritative, with no hint of concern that the text may have undergone changes along the path of transmission or that it was being quoted from memory. Does this suggest that interpretive additions and variants were not cause for concern or that approximate quotations were close enough? We would hardly want to impugn the wisdom of the New Testament authors in quoting from the Septuagint or one of the Hebrew texts available at the time.[16] Yet it almost seems scandalous: Why would God choose to reveal his truth this way?

We can only conclude—our modern cognitive environment notwithstanding—that the texts that the New Testament quotes were not disqualified as sources of truth because translators and scribes had not passed along the exact wording they found in the Hebrew manuscripts. Nor was the New Testament compromised for quoting these sources. We simply have to concede the point also made in proposition 13 about the transmission of the New Testament: exact wording was not necessary to preserve and transmit reliable representations of inspired truth.

A Trajectory of Orality

As noted in earlier chapters of this book regarding the Old Testament, orality often, if not always, preceded textuality (see especially proposition 1). Summarizing briefly, some of the sermons and other oral pronouncements of

Moses were likely written during his lifetime and under his supervision, though others may have been produced by later generations following various stages of oral transmission. The Old Testament narrative books also likely began as oral texts. Regarding the poetic and wisdom books, oral traditions of Job's life may have been used later as the basis for the wisdom book in the canon. Some of the psalms may have been oral compositions that remained in oral form for generations before being written. The wisdom sayings of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes probably began in oral form and were later compiled into lists of wisdom sayings. Regarding the prophets, Isaiah, for example, may have delivered oracles orally and not written anything; scribes likely generated documents preserving the sacred oracles. In other words, most of the authorities in the Old Testament might not have been authors themselves, even though written texts are associated with their names. The authorities expressed truths orally, and someone else wrote what they said. One can find orality behind the scenes of almost every part of the Old Testament.

A similar pattern prevailed in the New Testament. The sayings and deeds of Jesus (the new Moses) were not recorded during his lifetime or even soon thereafter. The New Testament is silent all the way through about any written forms of the gospel message, even in the books written near the end of the first century. As discussed in proposition 10, the letters of the New Testament likely took basic form first as oral texts before being written. It seems that orality is just as evident in the New Testament as in the Old Testament. (See proposition 18 for a discussion of God's spoken revelation.)

Returning to the translation and transmission of the Old Testament, the modus operandi of orality persisted beyond the writing events. It would be a false dichotomy to think that once oral texts were recorded in written form, textuality automatically displaced orality. Having been transmitted over long periods of time, oral texts, once committed to writing, continued to be recited. In the transmission of traditions, oral and written easily merged into one as performers seamlessly recounted what had been heard orally and what had been written.

Shemaryahu Talmon concludes that the Qumran community provides a model for how early Christians passed along their traditions in oral and written texts. Once traditions were written, they did not supplant oral transmission. The retelling of the traditions via oral texts continued unabated. Thus oral and written forms were not alternatives but complementary: "In the milieu which engulfed all varieties of Judaism at the turn of the era, a text was by definition an aural

text, a *spoken* writing, a performed story."[17] Talmon goes on to stress that written texts retained oral techniques, including wording, cadences and the typical structure of speeches.

The influence of orality can be seen in the quotations of the Old Testament in the New. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, when Jesus introduced a quotation from the Old Testament, in each case his formula was "You have heard that it was said [*legō*]." Twenty additional times in the New Testament verbs of speaking are used for Old Testament quotations. Also, similar to how Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount "you have heard," verbs of hearing are common in the New Testament for how people received the message of the Old Testament. We should not find this surprising both because the Old Testament is largely a record of things that had first been spoken and because most audiences of the New Testament heard the Old Testament Scriptures read aloud. But this does lend to the impression of an ever-present orality. (See proposition 18 for a discussion of 2 Peter 1:21.) We must not overlook, however, the frequent formula "as it is written," which is also used to introduce Old Testament quotations in the New. That both "it was said" and "it is written" should apply to Old Testament quotations is not surprising since the notion of oral and written tended to overlap.

As we have followed the trajectory of orality, it's clear that it manifested itself in many ways. Written texts did not mean the end of oral texts, and written texts could be treated as if they were oral texts. As noted in proposition 13, in manuscript culture texts written by hand functioned in nearly the same ways as oral texts that preceded them. The fluidity of oral and written texts, with slight variations, was similar if not the same. Written texts were advantageous primarily as a means of providing access to the traditions for a wider audience.

This is not an exhaustive discussion of the trajectory of orality. As seen in proposition 12, there was little distinction between what Paul proclaimed orally and what he wrote in his letters. And Christians at least a century after the founding of the church continued to prefer oral texts over written texts. But it does raise the question whether we need a theology of orality.

As noted above, if we fail to appreciate ancient communicative processes and do not make room for the uniqueness of oral culture, then we put our understanding of ancient texts in jeopardy. This applies in particular to the implications of orality for doctrines of Scripture. The inerrancy view affirms that Scripture is free from error in all respects. But with the evidence for frequency of variants and differences in detail noted throughout this book—either because

of oral transmission or scribal alteration—one could argue that there are a variety of errors in the written texts of Scripture. But by what standard? If modern print culture provides the criteria, then yes, we would have to admit there are errors. But is that not overlooking the distinctiveness of oral culture?

Ask a translator of the Septuagint, or a scribe at Qumran, or a New Testament author quoting the Old Testament whether any of the variants were a misrepresentation of truth, and the answer would be, clearly no. Similarly, if a person from modern Western culture were having a conversation about variants and errors with someone from ancient oral culture, it's likely that they both could look at the same evidence and come to opposite conclusions. The issue is different worldviews.

To say there are errors in the Bible is to read Scripture anachronistically. Conversely, those who say there are not errors need to make clear that they are representing an ancient view of reliable representations of truth. Modern print culture simply must not be the standard by which the customs and practices of ancient composition and transmission are judged.

Conclusion

Both the Old Testament and New Testament were conceived, born and cradled in orality.[18] The world of orality had changed little across the centuries, and much of what was true for the Old Testament held true for the New. With minimal modification, the genetic code of composition and transmission was passed on from the Old Testament to the New.

For many of us, a text of divine revelation accepted as having full authority though not word-for-word exact is a contradiction in terms. Yet the evidence points precisely in this direction. Copyists and scribes focused on transmitting the essential meaning of texts in the best ways possible for the benefit of their audiences. Preserving exact wording was not necessary in their minds, nor in the minds of the New Testament authors when they quoted from copies of the Old Testament. Differences in wording and details did not put truth at risk.

This might appear to have those of us who hold to inerrancy in a bind. If orality is a round hole, inerrancy could seem to be a square peg. Common definitions of inerrancy do not fit scenarios understood in light of orality (though some responsible constructive theological accounts come close). Yet orality was the way God chose, which must mean it was the right way. Evidently, we need to

adjust our understanding of inerrancy to the evidence we find in Scripture.

Part 3

The Biblical World of Literary Genres

Proposition 14

The Authority of Old Testament Narrative Literature Is More Connected to Revelation Than to History

When Genesis 41:57 asserts that "all the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph," what historical claim is being made? If there were people in parts of the world who did not come, would that prove the Bible false? If some countries were not represented, would inerrancy be nullified? If Joseph did not conduct each transaction, would the Bible's authority be jeopardized? We don't know anyone who would make such demands on the Bible, because here, unlike many other places, people easily accommodate the genre's literary and rhetorical conventions.

When Joshua 10:13 reports that the "sun stood still, and the moon stopped," what historical claim is being made? When we assert that the earth stopped, not the sun, are we undermining inerrancy? Should our understanding of the biblical claims not take account of the ancient Near Eastern perspective that determined how the claim would be understood in that context?

Evaluating the impact of ancient Near Eastern literature on our understanding of the biblical text remains one of the most vexing problems for those trying to engage in the academic study of the Bible while maintaining a robust doctrine of Scripture. Whether your preferred affirmation centers on "inerrancy," "infallibility," "authority" or some other descriptor, the playing field has shifted with the advent of comparative studies between the literature of the Bible and of the ancient Near East as one of the tools for exegetical analysis, particularly in the case of narrative literature.[1]

Hence, we must now examine the nature of the illocution and resulting meaning of narrative genres.[2] At times our distance from the ancient communicator might mean that we misunderstand the nature of his illocution because aspects of the locution are foreign to us. If we misunderstand elements of the locution, it is likely that we will not succeed in identifying the illocution. Comparative studies help us to understand more fully the locutions—that is, the form of their employed genres and the nature of their rhetorical devices—so that we do not mistake them for something that they never were. Such an exercise

does not compromise the authority of Scripture, but ascribes authority to that which the communicator was actually asserting in his illocutions.

The stage is now set for our reconsideration of the genre labels "historiography" (i.e., the recording of history) and "mythography" (i.e., the writing of mythological accounts) relative to locution and illocution, and ultimately for addressing accommodation and authority.[3] A *modern* understanding of historiography assumes that one of the author's illocutions is to *assert* the occurrence of events in the real world. The decision to also label ancient narratives as historiography suggests to modern readers the same illocution. Since it is illocution that carries authority and is considered reliable and inerrant, it has become important to some to identify the narratives of the Old Testament as historiography, and inversely important to others to deny that label. An alternative to historiography has been to move in the direction of "mythography," which would carry a very different illocution. The application of these labels to certain narratives (locutions) exerts decisive influence on the discernment of the nature of precisely what is being affirmed (through the illocutions), and thus becomes important in determining what carries authority in the biblical text and what should be considered inerrant or infallible.

How Should We Understand Ancient Historiography?

In modern discussions some people argue about whether a narrative in the Bible is recording "myth" or "history." Unfortunately, both of these terms are slippery and different scholars offer different definitions that help them to achieve the results they desire. In contrast, we should recognize that these terms have become so modern in their usage (though their etymologies go back to classical languages) that applying them to the ancient world risks anachronism. We should not believe that ancient narratives labeled historiography are necessarily engaged in the same literary goals as what we might label historiography today. Likewise we should not believe that ancient narratives labeled mythography were perceived in the ancient world as what we imply by attaching the label.

For example, we often attach the label historiography to literature that we expect will help us determine what "really happened." We are often interested in historical reconstruction. As interested as we might be in that pursuit, however, it would be a mistake to presume that *ancient* narratives that we label historiography automatically have the same goal. When we neglect the goals of

the ancient literature and instead use the literature to accomplish our own goals, we engage in a cultural imposition that subordinates what the ancients considered as the reality and values of their literature (i.e., their illocutions) to what we moderns consider to be a higher pursuit. We will never achieve a sound understanding of the literature, let alone a legitimate understanding of biblical authority, if we are always judging its suitability for reaching our modern objectives. We need to start approaching the literature as their literature rather than simply transforming it into our literature from which we then draw theological inferences. T. M. Bolin has drawn attention to these conflicting claims.

> Much of the present confusion in both sides of the debate about Israelite historiography is due to the fact that the term "historiography" is understood not as a genre classification, but rather as a sort of truth claim founded upon the assumption of equivocation between historical fact and truth.[4]

Since the modern categories of historiography and mythography are defined in modern terms, when we use them we have already distorted the literature we have labeled by imposing a set of expectations related to our label. But what alternatives do we have?

Ziony Zevit, in *Religions of Ancient Israel*, offers the term "truth-telling literature" and proposes, based on his analysis of testimonial literature, that when dealing with genres that are self-consciously truth telling the criterion that should be applied is not that of plausibility (often the standard of those studying ancient narrative skeptically), but that of deniability. That is, the claims of the literature should be taken as true unless there is evidence by which their truth could be denied. He concludes that such an approach would lead to reevaluation of biblical historiography and "some qualification of how skepticism may be wielded as a historical hermeneutic."[5] Those who agree with Zevit, as we do, may still find that while his observations point us in the right direction, much work remains to be done.

What we moderns have called historiography seeks to represent a particular reality associated with events (and the people that are involved in them). If it is not associated with an event it ceases to be historiography. This is true enough, but that does not mean that any literature that is associated with an event (or a complex web of events) should carry the designation of historiography. It is not enough to say that historiography is literature that represents an event, because

different cultures and different authors may have different ideas about how events can or should be represented. We must therefore understand something about cultural conventions concerning the best ways to represent events literarily. We discover to our chagrin that, for example, nothing like a modern historian existed in the ancient world. Jean-Jacques Glassner explains,

> The Mesopotamians had no profession of historian as we understand it today, nor its methods or perspective. As they saw it, the problem was not critical assessment of sources, nor was the question, fundamentally, knowing how and in what causal sequences events considered unique had occurred. The primary task was to choose, according to a definite focus of interest, among the carefully collected data from the past events, certain facts that, from that point of view, had acquired universal relevance and significance.[6]

We propose then that for our purposes here, we can talk about these ancient narratives by identifying them as "event-oriented literature." As identified by Zevit, this literature intends to tell the truth, but it does not work the same way as modern historiography. By nature, any event-oriented literature is selective, and its selectivity reflects the intentions and/or the agenda of the author, or more properly, given the scribal culture of the ancient world, of the sponsor of the narrative.[7] We therefore continue to affirm that before a work treating events of the past can be understood in historical terms, it must be understood as literature and be interpreted in light of its own conventions.

An example from the art world can be helpful at this juncture. A story (perhaps apocryphal) is told of Picasso at one of his art shows bantering with a critic. The critic's complaint was that Picasso should give more attention to portraying his subjects the way they really look. The artist averred that he was not sure what the critic meant by this. The frustrated critic took a photograph of his wife from his wallet, pushed it in Picasso's face and said "Here, this is what she really looks like." Picasso's droll response was that she seemed awfully small and must have difficulty getting around with only head and shoulders. This example helps us to understand that anyone who chooses to represent reality or truth could use a variety of conventions. Truth may not be relative, but an artist makes a choice of which truths to represent and how to do so.

Like artists, authors will insist on their rights to represent truth and reality using conventions that are meaningful to them and, presumably, to their audience. Like art, event-oriented literature needs to do more than simply

represent reality and truth in strictly mundane ways. Artists would say that they offer different truth than a photograph could. Literature has the same capacity to render reality and truth in ways that transcend documentary newsreels. The willingness of a reader to acknowledge event-oriented literature as true is dependent on the degree to which the reader can appreciate and affirm the author's literary portrayal of reality. Our inability to appreciate or affirm does not lessen the extent to which the texts represent reality to the authors[8]—the ancients did not do "unreal," but neither did they attempt objectivity. They would have been capable of greater objectivity (and some literature makes the attempt more than others), but often the very point of their writing was in their subjective portrayal of reality. Glassner astutely articulates this combination of subjectivity and reality: "Historical interpretation depends, in Mesopotamia as elsewhere, on an implicit philosophy based in the author's subjectivity, while he himself is imbued with the idea that he is writing 'reality.'"[9]

One who views art must first understand which aspect of reality the artist is portraying, and this literature is no different. Whether or not we share the artist's or communicator's perspective on the truth is a separate issue. The value of events in the ancient world was grounded firmly in the society's theology. For a modern historian such an element is sometimes seen to undermine the reliability of the reports, but for the ancients the theology was the raison d'être for the literature.

> Mesopotamian historiography was largely . . . a discourse on history supervised by the gods. Theology was the end, history the means to the end. This religious emphasis, far from calling into question the historical authenticity of the researches undertaken, was their very basis.[10]

This discussion then raises the important distinction between text and event.[11] Are we more interested in texts or events? Is there a relationship of the text to an event? If there is, what is the nature of that relationship? When we speak of biblical authority, we admit our ultimate interest is in texts. Only texts can be inspired, inerrant or authoritative; such labels do not apply to events. If we are to penetrate the poetics (text), we have to be willing to see the event and its significance through the authors' eyes, value system, beliefs and conventions.

It is important to recognize that, depending on the conventions used, it may be very difficult and potentially destructive to reconstruct the event from the text. This does not mean that the text's portrayal is false, only that we may not be able to penetrate its conventions sufficiently to represent the event by

conventions that are most meaningful to us. Like us, ancients adopted the conventions that best enabled them to express their most highly valued realities. We would not think that we could take Picasso's portrait of Dora Maar and reconstruct a photograph from it. Even if we had the photograph in front of us, we could not draw equations between the two to show how one led to the other. Our inability to do that would not suggest that Picasso's portrait was false or inaccurate—for that would privilege the conventions of the photograph as more important than the conventions of the painting. Our personal preference is of no consequence. If we intend to appreciate the art, we must think of the painting, not try to reconstruct a photograph from it. The same is true of the narrative literature of the ancient world. If we intend to affirm the text, we must consider its conventions and artistry. We can affirm that it is dealing with real events in a real past, but that does not mean that we could reconstruct the history in our terms (represented by the photograph).

What Is Mythography?

In contrast to historiography, literature that is commonly labeled mythography shows less interest in portraying events than in rendering the world meaningful through addressing how the world works and how it got that way. Though often adopting a narrative structure by recounting events, it is generally not interested in those events as events that can be connected with the human world.[12] Yet if we could ask mythographers whether they believe those events were real, they would likely be baffled by the question. Given what they know of the gods, and given what they know and think about the current shape of the world, this literature provides the best explanation they have to offer—the one most consistent with their beliefs and perspectives. It is their core reality.

Amid the proliferation of definitions for *myth*, our primary focus should be on defining the illocution of the particular pieces of mythographical literature rather than attaching a genre label. Mark Smith addresses the illocution of what are commonly labeled myths: "What myths seem to do is to evoke the basic realities that humans face and to present a narration that links these realities to the world of the gods and goddesses."[13] He continues,

> A myth's portrayal of the world is not explanatory in any modern sense; rather, it indicates that the problems of humanity are bound up with the

> divine world. In sum, myths narrate realities by presenting deities and their actions in or affecting the world, and they do so by building relations between these deities with plots that cover and cross over the inexplicable difficulties of human experience. Myths also indicate that in various ways deities are related to and have an impact on humanity in the midst of its numerous hardships.[14]

In this assessment we find that mythography has a different referent than historiography, yet is considered no less real. It may, however, be considered to pertain to a different plane of reality.

Comparing Mythography and Historiography

Literatures labeled mythography and historiography are on the same continuum, but each has a different focus in its expression of reality, and they are not the only two members of the continuum. We would further argue against describing it as a myth/history continuum, because that would still have the disadvantage of defining the field by our categories. A. K. Grayson makes the point well in his discussion of the Assyrian royal inscriptions.

> I have tried to avoid any subjective statement as to the literary and historical merits of these texts since decisions as to whether or not they are literature or history in the strict sense of those terms are inevitably more arbitrary than objective. Nonetheless, it seems to me that in the case of Assyrian royal inscriptions the matter is reasonably clear and I doubt that there are many who would call these texts either literature or history. That is not to deny the historical usefulness of these texts which are invaluable documentary sources for the modern historian who knows how to use them. But I do not believe that we can call them history by any definition of that word. Nor do I believe that we can call them literature.[15]

While the narrative literature we often refer to as historiography offers a representation of events, the objective of that literature is often ideological. In the ancient Near East that ideology supports kingship. In the Old Testament the ideology is theological. In both cases it is the ideology that determines how the communicator chooses to represent the events (selecting which parts to tell and

how to tell them).

The literature often referred to as mythography also deals with an ideology—one that sees what the audience considers the realities of the world around them in coherent ways. These narratives focus primarily on the activities of the gods and therefore often are framed in terms of events. But these events are not in the same category as those in the human realm. The speech acts in this category are not directed toward representing events, but using activities of the gods to convey an ideology.

We will focus our attention on the narratives in the Bible that *represent events in the human realm*. That description helps us focus on the nature of the genre. Genre is part of locution, and these particular locutions take the form of narrative pertaining to events of the past. As interpreters we have to determine what sort of claim or act the writer was intending to communicate by the locution. Generally communicators (even in our time) are not only interested in describing the past—they want to *do* something *with* the events of the past. These communicators believe that they are offering a perspective about a real past that is true. One could choose many different things to communicate about the past that were true, but communicators often will focus on the truth(s) that they see as most significant to the exclusion of other truths.

Sometimes we can get hints about the communicator's illocution (what he or she is trying to do with the events of the past) by attending to perlocution (what response is expected of me?).[16] Is the communicator's main goal that the audience admires or emulates the characters? Does he want them to feel faith? Shame? Fear? We would suggest that in the biblical narratives, the perlocution focuses on a response to God rather than to the events themselves or to the people engaged in the events (at the same time realizing that they must therefore be considered real events and real people in a real past). In that sense, theology takes the primary position, but the theology loses its force if the events did not happen. Therefore the truth of the event does not stop with an affirmation that the event happened—it finds its main objective in an affirmation of what God did. The reality includes both.

Taking this approach, would it be defensible for us *ever* to claim that the communicators or sponsors of what we call ancient historiography were trying to do what historians today are generally attempting to do (either at the illocutionary or perlocutionary levels)?[17] Glassner thinks not, and we would agree. "The Mesopotamians had neither the methods nor the schemes of the historian's trade. They were more concerned with selecting, around a definite

center of interest, certain facts that acquired universal relevance and meaning."[18]

Today, too often both skeptics and believers virtually discard the illocution and perlocution of the ancient literature as irrelevant or ignore it as fanciful. If we want to understand the poetics of these narratives we have to develop our analysis along the line of their speech acts and be content with that instead of imposing the demands of our skepticism or belief onto them.

The Illocution of Event-Oriented Literature

Articulating the illocution of event-oriented literature is not always straightforward. We should work on the principle set out earlier that such literature should be considered anchored in real events in a real past until that assertion can be denied (in contrast to considering it imaginary at some level until its plausibility can be demonstrated). Nevertheless, we cannot expect the ancient communicators to have shared our sense of what was most important as they represented the past. We must ask, How do we understand the ancient conventions of representation of those events as we discern the nature of the truth they seek to convey? The primary question, therefore, should be, What did they intend to do (illocution), and what conventions did they use to do it? It doesn't matter whether we can label what they intended to do as historiography, because different people define historiography differently, and we must not be dependent on our labels, which represent our values. John Marincola points us in a better direction, that of evaluating the literature on its own terms.

> It seems best to abandon the traditional distinctions, look instead at all the things included by a specific historian, and then interpret the individual work on its own terms. This must be done not to assign an historical work to one or another group [e.g., annalists, historians, antiquarians], but rather as a first step to understanding what the historian sees as relevant to the portrait of the past that he is attempting to create, and how the inclusion of such material in his work tries to mediate between that vision of the past and the present reality in which he finds himself. . . . Such an approach . . . better reflects the way the ancients themselves viewed the materials and methods available for an inquiry into the past, and will make it much less likely that we force ancient works into modern categories.[19]

This sort of deeper penetration is desirable and indeed essential to our discussions about authority and inerrancy. One way to begin this penetration is to begin asking a different set of questions. For example, given that the events truly happened, what is the principal referent in the literature? Is it *events* themselves or the *outcomes* of the events? In *our* historiography events are arguably the referents, though as we get further removed in time from the events, outcomes might grow in significance. In the ancient world it is more common to find a greater interest in the *outcomes* of an event or a series of events. The outcome could potentially reflect the perspective of those who have recently experienced the event or be the reflection of those who look back over decades or even centuries.[20] Outcomes exist on a spectrum from those that are experienced, through those that are perceived, to those that are desired and imagined.

If outcome is the referent, that referent would be nullified if the events were total fabrications. Consequently, even if the principal referent in focus is the outcome, that referent would presuppose a real event. Outcome is often more related to the present in which the literature is written, whereas events are in the past. Often the literature is linking the realities of the present (outcome) with some perspective about the past (events). The primary referent of the narrative literature may be an outcome, but the larger referential profile would include real events.

When outcomes are in mind, the illocution is *not* to describe or record an event. The illocution will vary from annals to chronicles and from Assyrians to Babylonians, but all are guided by an event orientation and a determinative or guiding value concerning the status of the king. The illocution is directed toward establishing or explaining the *outcome* reality. In effect then, the operative question this literature addresses is, How did we get here?—whether the literary piece is the Curse of Agade or the books of Kings or Chronicles. Ancients did not have the same interest in events that we do, and so they did not record them in ways that could readily feed our interests. If we are truly going to understand their literature and culture, we have to stop pursuing the transformation of their illocutions, realities and values into ours. This is misguided. Historiography is *our* label, *our* enterprise, *our* value, *our* way of framing reality, *our* way of understanding events. We cannot base our assessment of truth, authority or inerrancy on our cultural conventions of historiography, though we continue to be interested in all three of those concerns.

Once we observe the prioritization of outcomes over events, we find an

explanation for the different shape of the reports as we move from the books of Samuel and Kings to the books of Chronicles. With the passage of time, perception of outcomes evolves. The events of the monarchy did not change between the times of Kings and the Chronicler, but the communicators perceived it differently based on an evolving perception of the outcome. Once an event is reduced to narration, there is no longer an event, but only a text. That text will be determined by conventions of representation, perceptions of reality, decisions about values and priorities, and will be shaped to address the contemporary outcome status.

What then constitutes "real" events or people? Reality must be filtered through the conventions and the prioritizing of values. If we are concerned about whether people are "real" or whether they are portrayed as they "really were" we encounter the problem that even biographers face: the full and true reality of a person cannot be reduced to literary form. Any literary portrayal of a person creates to some degree an imaginary character. Glassner observes that in the literary packaging of the events of the past and the people of the past, both succumb to the patterns and categories seen by the author of the literature.[21] Yet since we are interested in understanding what God did through those people and events, both must remain rooted in a real past.

Conclusions

In order to retain and affirm inerrancy and authority, we have to be willing to suspend skepticism and adopt the reality and values that are bound up in the communicator's illocution. Like its ancient Near Eastern counterparts, Israelite event-oriented literature used conventional rhetoric and selection to edit the events in light of the outcomes so that patterns and values of reality emerge. Much of what modern scholars have anachronistically labeled historiography *does* have an event orientation, but the authors and compilers do not edit events with the same goals or methods that we use. If the biblical communicator's illocution shows his interest in an event orientation (such as is certainly the case in the parting of the Red Sea and the resurrection), then our commitment to take the communicator's illocution seriously compels us to accept the reality of those events. We would still not expect the ancient Israelite author to adhere to our literary conventions and reporting values, but we would attempt to understand theirs. To do otherwise would be to attribute authority to a text we have distorted

through anachronism. Our theological sensitivities should feel violated by such a misapplication of authority.

Such an approach gives no room to consider Abraham, Moses or David as merely literary figures. But other questions may be less straightforward. Is Noah simply a constructed literary reality? It would be difficult to sustain a case that the communicator's illocution was not to present a real event, and thus to assert the reality of a historical rescued remnant including Noah. But we also realize that the communicators conveyed this reality by means of their own rhetorical conventions and limited cosmic geography, and the events have been edited (as all reporting of events must be) to convey the intended outcome. We may not be able to reconstruct from the literature an account of the events of the flood in terms of our conventional historiographical illocution. But authority does not depend on our ability to transform the events into our illocutionary preferences. If the illocution of the communicator is to be found in the values and outcomes, then our responsibility is to affirm those values and outcomes.

The operative question relative to authority then must always be, What is the communicator's illocution? We cannot claim as a default that the communicator's illocution is historiographical just because he is dealing with real events. There is no reason to believe that any communicator in the ancient Near East had illocutions that aligned with the illocutions of modern historiography. We should feel no inclination to force ancient literature into these straitjackets of modern convention as if modern historiography represents the highest value. Redefining our modern terms does not bring resolution. We should not be asking, What is the event? (typically the goal of modern historiography). We should be asking, What is the outcome that the author sees as the result of a series of real events, and what value does that outcome have? What reality does that outcome embody? Do not misunderstand—this does not give permission to deny that the event took place; it is merely recognition of the obstacles we face if our interest is in recovering a record of the event in our terms. Even when we find ourselves incapable of evaluating the reality of the event, we find confidence in the idea that the reported outcome assumes the event to be real. *Our* interests should be viewed as secondary; the text's interests prevail. Inerrancy and authority relate more importantly to the communicator's representation of the event than to the reality of the event itself, though the communicator's belief in the reality of the event should lead us to the same affirmation.

Communication theorists talk about the concept of coherence, defined as

"what hearers or readers are bringing about when they apply their knowledge of the world to the text."[22] Nicolai Winther-Nielsen adds that "coherence anchors the language of narrative to contexts."[23] For the narratives that typically are placed in the category of historiography, the anchor for the context is an event that has transpired. But the context is also defined by the conventions by which events are understood, communicated and take on significance.

Some conclusions we might propose:

- As evangelicals, we are misguided when we focus primarily on defending a modern definition of historicity, but no more misguided than critics who share the same focus as they seek to undermine historicity—both are too dependent on anachronistic, modern labeling of ancient literature that neglects the values of that literature.
- Most if not all of what are sometimes deemed historical inaccuracies or contradictions slip out of sight when we focus on the conventions of ancient literature, properly distinguishing locutions and illocutions. Fact checking (as much as it is possible) must always be done in light of the acceptable ancient conventions.[24]
- Attempts to negotiate the boundaries of "mythography" and "historiography" are misguided as they impose on the literature categories and boundaries that are anachronistic to its locutions and inappropriate to its illocutions.
- We need not worry if we are unable to reconstruct events of antiquity for our historiographical enterprise, and we should not be surprised at our inability to do so.
- As people who take the Bible seriously, we are invested in the entire speech act of Scripture, but authority is found on the illocutionary level. Locutions come from God but can be distorted and abused if not guided by the authoritative direction set by the illocution.
- Genre, language and conventions of communication operate on the locutionary level.
- Biblical authority is guided by the illocutions of the communicator and is based on adopting the ideas and values of the communicator and his perception of reality. Inerrancy operates on this level.
- Inerrancy cannot be maintained if we deny the reality of events and

people that the text presents as real; but our affirmations of inerrancy cannot be based on the shape that we reconstruct for events by imposing our conventions and values on the ancient literature.

- Our faith inclines us to accept the biblical perspectives and values of coherence as they reconstruct events through narrative, but we have not shown enough sensitivity to their conventions. Ancient communicators did not falsify events or people, but neither did they share or abide by our conventions of reportage or testimony. Except when there is deniability, we should assume that events happened.[25] We dare not impose our conventions, even though we share the communicator's values, perspectives, and faith and adopt their views of theological coherence.
- Instead of saying God accommodates error (as Kenton Sparks concludes; see proposition 3) we should rather say that God accommodates cultural limitations and literary conventions in the locutions which his chosen communicators are inspired to make.
- We need to recognize that all conventions allow for bypassing some of the truths in favor of accenting the truths that are deemed more significant. For example:
- Photographs bypass the truths of dimension, proportion, size and body configuration to focus on the truth of facial appearance (the most flattering that can be achieved).[26]
- Royal Assyrian inscriptions involving military campaigns may bypass truths of extent, size, time and losses to focus on the truth of royal legitimacy (the most flattering that can be achieved).
- The Deuteronomist may bypass truths of real political and military achievements by certain kings (e.g., Ahab) to focus on covenant failures (the least flattering that can be achieved).

How can we tell what can be set aside as cultural and what we are responsible to embrace on the basis of biblical authority? The key distinction exists between the locutionary framework and the illocutionary focus. In event-oriented literature, that usually means the event and the characters who took part in the event are essential to the illocutionary focus and therefore must be affirmed. The illocution cannot be reduced to a vague perlocution (believe that God is sovereign). We may find it difficult to assess some of the details given

(geography, chronology, numbers of either the armies or of the casualties), and the conventions of reportage and the rhetoric associated with the genre may not correspond to our own, but the illocution must be presumed to have worked from real events and real people unless it could be demonstrated otherwise.[27] Even more important, affirmation must be given to the metanarrative that is articulated in the report—generally concerning the role and nature of deity.

Proposition 15

The Authority of Old Testament Legal Literature Is More Connected to Revelation Than to Law

The legal literature of the Pentateuch has posed problems to interpreters in a number of different ways. At the level of locution (the words of the legal statement), the discovery of legal collections (such as the Stele of Hammurabi) in archaeological excavations in the Middle East brought confusion to those who wondered how the laws in the Bible could be considered revelation from God if other cultures had very similar laws centuries earlier. With regard to illocutions that are regarded as commands, Christian interpreters were faced with the problem that if these commands carried the authority of Scripture, how could they be set aside? If authority is associated with the illocution, how can the authority be maintained if the laws are not to be obeyed? This problem carries over into the perlocution when we ask what it means to be faithful to the law in our conduct today.

Further problems arise when scholars apply source analysis to the legal material. In the Wellhausen-style separation into sources, the postexilic "P" source was assigned the material that had to do with rituals and sacrifices, temples and priests. Eventually an "H" source was identified as a subsection that pertained to purity laws. The "D" source was found primarily in the formulations of the book of Deuteronomy and was especially interested in the central sanctuary. In most source analysis suggestions were made about laws from different sources that contradicted one another or that showed development from one stage of society to another. In this form of source analysis, the role of Moses and the coherence of the Pentateuch was forfeited and consequently authority was undermined.

As a final problem, the very nature of the genre raises questions about what we mean when we assert inerrancy. Does that mean the law is the best law—legally without flaw? If so, why do we not keep many of them anymore? Does it mean that the law really was a law of Israel? That would seem to be of minimal importance. Does it mean that the law really came through Moses? We would have to determine if that claim is really being made. Does it mean that the law really came from God? We have to sort out what authority and inerrancy pertain

to when we deal with the biblical legal material.

The Locutions of Law

How can the locutions of biblical laws be considered revelation from God if very similar locutions already existed in the rest of the ancient world? Furthermore, even with regard to the Israelites it would be irrational for us to believe that for the centuries from Abraham to Moses they were a lawless people feeling free to murder and commit adultery whenever they chose until God came down on Sinai to give them a different way. If similar laws already existed in the ancient world in general and in Israel specifically, how do the formulations of the Pentateuch come to be thought of as revelation and having authority?

The solution is found in the distinctions that we have already been making between locution and illocution. We have been suggesting that locutions commonly intersect with the culture of the people and accommodate society. Locutions do not carry independent authority[1] and do not have to be new to be used in revelation. The revelation and authority belong primarily to the illocution. Consequently, we do not have to think that these were new laws, never heard or considered before. It would be no surprise or problem if Israel had already been living by similar laws and other nations had similar laws. We will find the important distinctions at the illocutionary level.

The Illocutions of Law

Our analysis must begin with a clearer understanding of what sort of illocution is the intent of the legal sayings in the ancient world, and then we can compare that to the biblical legal sayings. When the ancient legal documents were first found early in the twentieth century, they were understood to be a catalog of legal decrees and were therefore designated as legal codes. As time went on, however, further analysis led to several other hypotheses.[2] The current view is that the collection of legal sayings in the ancient Near Eastern documents constitutes expressions of legal wisdom assembled under the king's sponsorship (and attributed to him) to provide evidence of his wisdom and justice to the gods and to provide instruction in judicial wisdom to judges in his realm.

These are not laws that have been enacted, nor necessarily rulings that have

actually been given. They are treatises on judicial wisdom. One could not necessarily draw that conclusion from the locutions alone. It is the larger literary context and observations about the nature of the collection that lead to an understanding of the illocution. Specifically, then, the illocution is not decreeing legislation, making laws or gathering actual verdicts. The speech act is to provide instruction so that justice is maintained. The collection is to be taken seriously, but it does not carry the authority of legislation. The sayings are attributed to the authority of the king (he is, after all, the authority figure), but they are not necessarily his rulings or his design. He is their sponsor. No mechanism exists to assure that the sayings are enforced in any way. The authority that the sayings carry pertains to the legal wisdom personified in the authority figure, the king. Here, as in the Bible, the authority that this document carries is related directly to what it is and what it intends to do—its illocution.

Now we are ready to shift our attention to the legal sayings in the Pentateuch. It has traditionally been assumed that these sayings were "laws" that were being decreed—the equivalent of today's legislation. That is a conclusion about the illocution of these sayings and is not automatic or transparent; it is certainly not the only possible conclusion. The Israelites are instructed to observe and obey (the perlocutions that will be discussed in the next section), and the legal sayings themselves are labeled in different ways. (English translations include terms like "statutes," "precepts," "decrees," "instruction," "words," "commands," "judgments" and more.) Each of these translations reflects *interpretation* of Hebrew terms that themselves are not always understood precisely or rendered consistently.[3]

As with the material from the ancient Near East, it is necessary to draw conclusions about the nature of the illocution by evaluating the terminology, the literary context and the perlocutions. This is not the place to go through a detailed analysis of each of the Hebrew terms.[4] Nevertheless, brief comment concerning the principal term, *tôrâ*, is necessary. The term is often translated "law" and is applied to the whole corpus of legal sayings as well as to the whole of the Pentateuch. Modern consensus, however, is that the term applies more generally to oracles, the resulting instruction and ultimately, revelation.[5] The term "denotes an instruction or behavioral norm whose authority and binding force depend on its source."[6] It pertains first to the realm of prophecy, second to the realm of wisdom and only third to the legal realm (and that premised on the first two). Any words that have their source in God must be taken seriously, though a wide variety of responses may be appropriate depending on the nature

of the illocution.

Nothing from the ancient Near East suggests that any society had a normative written set of laws that contained a comprehensive legal code for that society. From the discussion of hearing-dominant cultures in the early chapters of this book, it is easy to see why that is the case. Written documents did not hold the position of authority in a hearing-dominant context. There is no reason to think that there was a comprehensive, written, authoritative document containing the legislation for Israelite society.

When we consider the literary context of legal sayings in the Pentateuch, a number of possible illocutions might be suggested. For example, the collection of "laws" (Hebrew: *mišpāṭîm*) in Exodus 21–23 may take their illocution from the proximity of the narrative in which Moses is selecting and presumably instructing judges (Ex 18). For the laws of Deuteronomy, Stephen Kaufman suggests that their illocution was to serve as expansion of each of the sayings of the Decalogue in order.[7] Be that as it may for some of the individual collections, the general literary context for the legal collections of the Pentateuch is related to the covenant. In this case the illocution becomes *stipulations of a covenant agreement* rather than *legislation of a society*.

The Perlocution of Law

It is noteworthy that the two most common verbs that express the perlocution of the legal sections are "obey" (*šĕmaʾ bĕ*) and "keep, observe" (*shamar*). It has been common to use the English "obey" even though the Hebrew verb speaks primarily of hearing. The assumption is that when one hears, one will also then act in accordance to what one hears. "Observe" does not refer to visually observing a text, but to embracing a truth—conforming one's behavior to expectations. It pertains most specifically to taking responsibility for something.

The literature of the Pentateuch, with its covenantal context, carries the perlocution for Israel that they should adhere to the torah so that they might remain in covenant relationship with Yahweh and that he might remain dwelling in their midst. How would they know they were keeping these covenant stipulations? What would it look like? The text identifies this for us: they will be keeping the covenant to the extent that they are holy as Yahweh their God is holy. The ultimate perlocution is not justice or obedience. Those are only stops on the way toward holiness.

In recognition of this perlocution and on the basis of our analysis of illocution, we could conclude that though the locutions found in the Pentateuch could serve as laws, that is not their illocution in the literary context. They are stipulations to Israel's covenant relationship, read regularly because of the authority they carried for defining that covenant relationship. We are not part of Israelite society, so any prior illocution as laws would not carry any perlocution for us. Likewise, we are not party to the covenant relationship that God had with Israel, so the Pentateuch carries no perlocution for us that relates to remaining in covenant relationship with Yahweh or assuring that his presence is maintained in our midst.

The more general perlocution related to holiness, however, continues to carry significance into the canonical level of the text as it pertains to Christians. The legal sayings of the Pentateuch served as revelation not because they gave new laws (locutions), but because they showed God's holiness even as he asked his people to be holy as he was. Consequently the locution that forbids murder in Assyria would not carry the same illocution and perlocution as the same locution in the Pentateuch. Assyrians were prohibited from murder because otherwise justice could not be maintained in society, disorder would reign, people would be hindered from their worship practices, the gods would not be properly cared for and the kings would be deemed failures and removed by the gods. That same locution for the Israelites would ask them to recognize that respecting the dignity of life in the image of God was inherent to holiness and to the character of God. Emulation of Yahweh in these areas was something they were to aspire to. As Jesus points out in the Sermon on the Mount, the perlocution extends beyond actually not taking someone's life. Jesus came not to abolish the perlocutions deriving from Moses' authority, but to show the way to the most appropriate and ideal perlocutions of those locutions. The legal sayings in the Pentateuch revealed the character of Yahweh, and the character of Yahweh has not changed. Believers still have the obligation to reflect that character as they seek to be holy as God is holy. Jesus, as God in the flesh, embodied the character of God, and so the revelation through the legal sayings is fulfilled in him, and through him we see how we are to respond to those legal sayings. The authority of the legal sayings is found in the revelation they offer of the character of God and the way they serve as guides to holiness. None of the locutions ("jot and tittle") will pass away until the ultimate illocutions are fulfilled in an outworking of the ultimately intended perlocutions.

If this is true, we are now ready to assess the authority of the text in light of

questions about composition. The following observations would logically follow:

1. We do not need to be concerned whether the legal sayings were actually ever enforced as laws in Israel's social structure. In line with what we find in the ancient Near East, they could be considered to represent that which is ideal or theoretical. Nevertheless, they give illustrations of some of the forms holiness would take, and it is expected that they be taken seriously.

2. It would be in the realm of possibility that the umbrella of Moses' authority was extended (by readers, if not always with canonical approval) across generations (as we find even as late as the Pharisees). The Pharisaic interpretations and explanations were considered as deriving from the authority of Moses. Any such extension of authority would be a decision for the community of the faithful to make.

3. If laws were updated for new situations in society, that would not be a problem in theory, though we should be cautious about our ability to identify such supposed later revisions. Our attempts to do so are encumbered with many presuppositions and criteria that would be subject to dispute.

4. We may well be skeptical about the sources proposed by Wellhausen and others since they posit sophisticated literary compositions earlier than we might expect them given the hearing-dominant nature of Israelite society. At the same time, source-critical reconstructions deny the attachment of documents to the authority figure of Moses. This combination leads to the conclusion that the critics are both too skeptical (about Moses' role affirmed in the traditions) and not skeptical enough (about their own reconstructions).

In conclusion, how should we articulate the authority and inerrancy of the legal materials? Authority derives from God through the authority figure that serves as the fountainhead of the material—the conduit chosen by God. Moses is that figure and was recognized as such by his community. His office is a prophetic one, and the legal sayings came as authoritative oracles imbued with wisdom. They do not carry authority for us primarily in the legislative realm

(though they have implications for that realm) or in the covenantal realm (though they serve a purpose there); they carry authority as God's revelation of his character and his holiness. Christians remain responsible for holiness as they seek to be like God as revealed in Christ, and the legal sayings retain their usefulness in giving information about what that will look like. Our use of the legal sayings presumes our ability to unpack competently the meaning of the locutions and the nature of the illocutions. If locutions and illocutions were supplemented to the original material connected more directly to Moses, it was done under the auspices and with the approval of the community of faith as they sought to preserve and extend Moses' authority through changing times.

Inerrancy as a term is not well-suited to making clear statements about the nature of our understanding of the legal sayings. We cannot say that inerrancy demands it all came from Moses, because not all the statements make that claim. We cannot say that these were actually laws in Israel, because it is not clear that a claim like that is being made (what is the illocution?). We cannot claim that inerrancy demands that these legal sayings represent a coherent legal code, for the material does not make that claim and the logic behind it does not reflect what we know of the ancient world and how law worked.

On the positive side, we should no longer feel that authority or inerrancy is threatened by those who suggest that some legal sayings might be later additions or that some offer alternatives to other sayings' ways of dealing with issues. In the model presented here, if those situations exist they are no threat to inerrancy. In the past evangelicals more often applied the term *inerrancy* to the source of the laws (Moses/God) rather than to the formulation of the laws (this is what the law actually was). The model presented here does not change that except insofar as it recognizes more extensive ways of understanding the authority of Moses.

For Further Reading

Knight, Douglas. *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

Proposition 16

The Authority of Old Testament Prophetic Literature Is More Connected to Revelation Than to Future-Telling

In one sense all the literature of the Old Testament can be considered prophetic literature since it finds its source in God. This was the view of the rabbis as they identified literature that they would classify as authoritative and canonical. Moses is the prophet connected with the Torah, and their two other main canonical categories are identified as the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. The Writings make up the last category of the canon. Nevertheless, the Christian canon has a more limited group of compositions classified as prophetic literature.

Prophetic oracles are known from the ancient Near East from early in the second millennium through the mid-first millennium. They are classified among other forms of divination as one of the means used by the gods to communicate. The literature includes letters that contain single oracles, letters about oracles and reference to the involvement of the prophets in the administrative decision-making process. There are no collections of a single prophet's oracles incorporated into a literary composition.[1] The prophets in the ancient world were taken seriously as conduits for divine communication, so their oracles were committed to writing so that they could be reported to the king. They carried an innate authority, but still were cross-checked by other forms of divination.

The Prophetic "Books"

Israelite prophecy is closely related to what we find in the ancient Near East, especially in its earlier stages (such as found in David's prophet, Nathan).[2] The prophets whose oracles are collected into literary compositions differ from what is found in the ancient Near East in that they address the people more than the king and tend to take an adversarial posture toward the administration, in contrast to the ancient Near Eastern prophets whose oracles tend to support and even legitimate the king. Despite this countercultural role in Israel, a few of the

prophets over the centuries came to be recognized as authority figures significant enough that their oracles were collected and woven into literary compositions. We should note that there were many prophets operating in Israel in all periods of the monarchy, from the “sons of the prophets” who appear in the times of Samuel, Elijah and Elisha, to the prophets that Jeremiah opposed. Only a select few had their oracles preserved.

How was it determined which prophets had authority? We observe in Jeremiah that the prophets as a class were considered authoritative. Kings regularly had prophets in their employ, and they were regarded highly as messengers of the deity. When we consider how some of those prophets came to be distinguished as choice servants of God whose words should be preserved, we remember the proposal in proposition 3 that the community of faithful people, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, made that determination that was subsequently affirmed by the following generations. That status was substantiated by the accuracy of the assessment of the spiritual condition of the people and by the fact that their oracles blossomed into reality recognized as fulfillment. We have accepted those judgments made by that community of faith and affirmed by its successors. In a similar fashion, communities of faith determined that certain literary works at the end of the process that gathered together the oracles of the prophets in meaningful ways ought to be accorded the status of canon. We have accepted those judgments as also happening under the supervision of the Holy Spirit.

Having made those determinations, there is no reason not to extend what we see on the two ends (spoken oracles, final literary compositions) to the long, complex process in the middle. For example, if the community of faith decided that disciples of Isaiah wore his mantle and carried the extension of his authority, they could readily append the oracles of the successors to the work of the master. If they did so, we can accept that judgment and view the texts in that way. This would not be a case of deception, hoax, pseudepigraphy or anything else shady. If such an extension occurred, we would not be surprised that there is a degree of literary continuity (they are his disciples); nor would we feel constrained to believe the master was the originating authority behind the full set of oracles. He is the authority figure behind that stream of tradition.[3] The disciples would not be posing as the master, nor would the inclusion of their oracles by the later community represent misunderstanding. Isaiah would rightly be identified as the authority figure behind the stream of tradition.

Such a model is not driven by skepticism nor fueled by overly optimistic

self-assessment about our ability to determine what sections might have what status. Maybe all of the text belongs to the master. If, however, oracles by some successors were appended, that would not be a problem for authority or inerrancy. We are not presenting a conclusion about what *did* happen; we are presenting a model for incorporating any number of possibilities concerning what kinds of scenarios existed in the ancient world to map which battles should be fought, which hills to die on.

The books of the prophets are attached to an authority figure, and that figure's role should not be minimized. But at the same time we don't want to mistake the claim for something that it was not. With no "authors" and no "books" we cannot construct our understanding of the authority of the biblical texts based on those anachronisms. What we have learned about scribes has to inform our model. We rely on communities of faith who have made decisions throughout time and at every step in the process of composition.

Isaiah's oracles initially pertained to his eighth-century audience. In Isaiah 40–66 the oracles do not directly address an eighth-century audience. It is certainly possible that the eighth-century prophet, under the power of the Spirit, addressed an audience several centuries in the future and spoke specifically of details he would have no human way of knowing. At the same time, it is possible that the mantle of Isaiah was passed to successors who continued the tradition of his ministry enjoying empowerment from the Spirit and validation by the community.[4] Isaiah would continue to be viewed as the authority figure who was the fountainhead of this prophetic activity, and thus the oracles of his successors would legitimately be appended to his work by whichever generation eventually created the literary composition we know as the book of Isaiah. We could not prove this happened; there is no explicit indication in the text that sections are appended, though many scholars have believed they can discern differences. We are only saying that knowing what we do about the scribal practices, it would be no surprise that it could happen, and it would be no surprise that it would happen without remark in the text itself. We are not arguing *for* this sort of complex composition.[5]

Let us be clear: we are not offering a proposal concerning the composition of the book; we are considering compositional scenarios that would be plausible given what we are learning about literary production in the ancient world. We are most interested in considering these scenarios not to prove or disprove them, but to explore what impact, if any, they would have on our understanding of biblical authority should they be true. We are convinced that the multiple-layers

scenario could have happened, that Isaiah would still be considered the authority figure and that a model of authority can easily incorporate that possibility. The result would be that the "authorship of Isaiah" would not need to be viewed as a battleground. The claims made by the presence of the name Isaiah are different than we have thought. The title does not claim to identify the "author" of a "book." If that claim is not being made, then our conclusions are not affected by a commitment to inerrancy. It is fruitless to try to understand who the "author" of the "book" of Isaiah is if those categories are meaningless in the ancient world.

Prophecy and Fulfillment

Another aspect of prophetic literature that is important to the discussion of biblical authority is the relationship between prophecy and fulfillment. When we read some of the New Testament passages that identify Jesus as the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy, it is not uncommon that we sense a bit of a disconnect concerning how what the prophet said is related to what the apostle claims. What implications are carried by the term *fulfillment*? Is the claim being made that the prophet knew of Jesus by virtue of his inspiration? (Some believe that Lk 24:27, 44 affirm this view.) Are the apostles revealing the true meaning of the prophets' words? Is inerrancy threatened if readers conclude that Jesus and the apostles were teaching the right doctrine from the wrong texts?[6] These are matters of great dispute among evangelical scholars. Some are content to believe that Jesus and the apostles are simply using the hermeneutical methods of the day that gave significant freedom in associating a prophecy with a proposed fulfillment.[7] Others insist that Jesus and the apostles are drawing out the true meaning of the prophets, a meaning that was always there to be seen.[8] Those in the latter group sometimes bring inerrancy into the discussion, suggesting that if what has been identified as a fulfillment is not what the prophet was talking about, the apostle or Jesus would therefore be guilty of error.

This is not the place to evaluate these views in detail, so our purpose here is much more limited. As is true in general in this book, we are not analyzing what others have said, but offering the reader some perspectives that we hope will be helpful.

Any discussion of inerrancy related to prophecy and fulfillment must be based on a realistic understanding of the roles of the prophet and of the apostle. Prophets were the spokespersons for deity. Their messages pertained at times to

the past, to the present or to the future. They were not soothsayers; they proclaimed the plan of God. If they were truly speaking words from God, then surely their words carried authority and, to the extent they pertained to the future, would be accomplished. It was natural, moreover, to believe that God may have more in mind than what had been communicated. At the same time, their messages were intended to have meaning and significance to their immediate audience. That contemporary message carried authority. To use our speech-act terminology, the prophets' locutions were words given by God. They had particular illocutions associated with those locutions that resulted in perlocutions for their immediate audience.

When the apostles identify fulfillment of those prophecies, they are introducing a new illocution. It may or may not be tied to the illocutions the prophets had in their contemporary context, but that does not matter. The apostles have their own recognized authority, and their illocutions are manifestations of that authority. The apostles are not necessarily trying to shed light on the illocutions of the prophets, though at times their illocutions may do so. In this way of thinking, we can see that fulfillment (identified by the apostles) is not the same thing as the message proclaimed by the prophets and doesn't offer itself as being the same. The prophet and the apostle are both authority figures, and their messages are considered to carry authority. The claim of those identifying fulfillment is related to the locution of the prophet, which is now being given a different though possibly related illocution.

In this understanding, inerrancy does not come into the discussion. The apostle cannot be in error in his handling of the prophecy because he has the freedom his authority gives him to break new ground. He doesn't assume anything about what the prophet knew or did not know about how his prophecy might unfold. The prophet's revelation is found in his message, not in the fulfillment of his message. The apostle's revelation is found in the unfolding of the prophet's locution into a fulfillment. That revelation, like any revelation, cannot be errant or inerrant—it is what it is: revelation.

In contrast to some others,[9] we do not believe that we can reliably imitate what the apostles are doing because their task is rooted in their authority (which we do not possess). Consequently, any of our suggestions about fulfillment would be only suggestions with no authority.

We have now affirmed that both the prophets and the apostles are authority figures and that the compilation of their prophetic oracles and identifications of fulfillment respectively are extensions of their authority. How does inerrancy

come into the picture? Inerrancy would first affirm that the prophets were real people existing in a real past. Second, it would affirm that the recorded oracles reliably represent the prophet's spoken oracles (or those added by his followers should there be any). Third, it would affirm that these oracles were indeed God's revelation through the prophet, not the prophet's own imagination. Finally, inerrancy would assert that the oracles gave an accurate representation of God and his plan. Inerrancy would offer no information about "authorship" or about fulfillment.

With regard to the apostles, the inerrancy of their proclamations of fulfillment cannot be falsified. Since we believe that the apostles have authority, we accept their identification of fulfillment. Inerrancy would not relate to whether the fulfillment matched what the prophet had originally said because such exposition is not the role of the apostle and not necessarily his intention.

It is interesting that inerrancy is most often invoked in connection with the question of whether a prophet actually gave information about specific people before they were on the scene. Thus Isaiah's prophecy concerning Cyrus (Is 44:28; 45:1) and Daniel's prophecies concerning the Hellenistic period (Dan 11) have become the main centers of attention. Inerrancy is invoked to insist that since Isaiah lived in the eighth century and Cyrus did not come until the sixth century, we have evidence of God giving his prophet information far in advance. This is then used to undergird theological assertions about the nature of prophecy, the nature of the prophet and even the nature of God (proving his knowledge and control of the future). All of this is loaded on the back of inerrancy. These interconnections, however, are based on the firm belief that the Bible makes a claim that the eighth-century Isaiah had sole responsibility for the biblical book. We have seen that given what we know of literary production in the ancient world—of the way that oral communication was eventually preserved by scribes in documents that later were combined into literary compositions—the reference to Isaiah identifies him as the fountainhead of the oracles whose authority is behind the book. That is a different sort of claim.

Let us be clear: we are *not* suggesting that the Cyrus oracles were *not* the work of eighth-century Isaiah. Skepticism is not the point here. God is able to give specific information to prophets centuries in advance should he choose to do so. We firmly believe that he knows the future and controls it. Inerrancy, however, is not the way to bolster those beliefs because the Bible does not make "authorship" claims as clearly as we thought. We should feel no compulsion to posit the source of the Cyrus oracles as eighth-century Isaiah, though he may

well have been. It is simply not an issue for inerrancy to decide. The oracle would have authority, and we could even say the authority of Isaiah, even if it was an oracle spoken by one of his disciples closer to the time of Cyrus. The authority is recognized by the community. If they extended the authority of the eighth-century prophet to his followers and included them together in one literary composition, we accept their judgment by faith even as we accept their judgment about the authority of Isaiah himself. We likewise validate the judgment of those who recognized the authoritative status of the eventual compilation of this collection of oracles into the complex literary work we call "Isaiah."

This same approach can be used for the book of Daniel. We affirm that there was a real Daniel who lived in the sixth century and served in the courts of kings from the time of Nebuchadnezzar to the time of Cyrus. We accept that the narratives about his life reflect real events in a real past, though, as always, reported through the accepted conventions for narrative in that time. These narratives would likely have existed in individual documents for some time before being compiled into the literary work that we know. We have a different set of claims, however, regarding the oracles of Daniel than we had with Isaiah. In Daniel 7, the vision is reported by someone else (Dan 7:2), but is then reported in the first person. In chapters 8–10 the oracular experiences are presented in the first person with no recognized outside reporter, though Daniel 10:1 does refer to Daniel in the third person. Chapter 11 makes no explicit claims, but chapter 12 picks up again with Daniel from verse 4 on.

As before, we are not trying to sort out which parts should be attributed to whom. We are quite willing to proceed on faith rather than skepticism with regard to God's willingness and ability to give the specific details of the Hellenistic period to Daniel in the sixth century. The question concerns how clearly that claim is made. Is it possible that a follower of Daniel some centuries later expanded Daniel's oracle in chapter 10 to include the details in chapter 11? We could not rule it out. Whether the oracle was given two centuries before the events or two months before the events would make little difference.

The more significant question concerns whether the oracle is in the category of *vaticinu ex eventu* ("speaking after the event"), a genre that treats part of the past as if it were still future as a basis for then making a few statements about what the near future will bring. This is a complex genre question. Remember that genres cannot be true or false, errant or inerrant; they are what they are. If such a genre was recognized in the ancient world and readers would have

understood the nature of that genre, it would be perfectly legitimate for a communicator to use that genre. It would not be considered deceptive if there were a common understanding of how the genre worked. But the genre question is far from settled, and we cannot try to settle it here. We can only say that if by virtue of a recognized genre (like *vaticinu ex eventu*) a book spoke of the past as the future, we could not invoke inerrancy to claim otherwise. Much work would still have to be done to make such claims, but the issue itself is not truly in the purview of inerrancy. If *vaticinu ex eventu* was recognized as a legitimate genre, authority would be viewed in light of the conventions of the genre.

For Further Reading

Ben Zvi, Ehud, and Michael H. Floyd, eds. *Writing and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.

Proposition 17

The Genres of the New Testament Are More Connected to Orality Than Textuality

Suppose a group of people moved from the country to the city. Never having heard about mechanized vehicles they were astonished to see people in the city crawling in and out of and riding around in very strange contraptions. And suppose the people in the city had never heard of traveling by horseback. The country folk would need to explain what their mode of transportation was like back home.

There was one thing that especially baffled the country folk: the city dwellers talked about hundreds of horsepower in their automobiles. So where were the horses? And how could city dwellers not know about horses? Nevertheless, the country folk set about to describe horses and horseback riding, and they chose to do so in relation to automobiles.

They began by saying that they traveled on wheelless automobiles. When that image left the city dwellers confused, they added that their mode of transportation had hooves, kind of like big toenails. With an even more puzzled look on their friends' faces, the country folk added that their wheel-less automobiles had bones, flesh and muscles like humans. It didn't take long to realize this wasn't going to work.

This analogy may not make perfect sense, but it underscores an important point: "You cannot without serious and disabling distortion describe a primary phenomenon by starting with a subsequent secondary phenomenon and paring away the differences. Indeed, starting backwards in this way—putting the car before the horse—you can never become aware of the real differences at all."[1]

If we want to understand ancient literary culture, we will do ourselves no favor if we simply seek to pare away the layers of textuality in order to get at orality. We might as well be city dwellers trying to conceptualize a wheel-less automobile or country people picturing a horseless carriage. The truth of the matter is, in its initial forms the message of the New Testament was textless. It was a horse, not a car. And to comprehend that, we need to live on the farm for a while—a farm of another era and another culture—and learn more about

wheelless automobiles, or, in this case, textless texts.

As we have suggested throughout this book, the dissimilarities between modern Western and ancient Mediterranean cultures stand in the way of understanding almost opposite ideas about orality and textuality. Our differences are more significant than most of us are prepared to accept and appreciate. We have seen that orality permeates ancient Near Eastern culture, Greek and Roman culture, and the Bible. It extends into medieval culture as well. The Renaissance, especially the printing press and the dissemination of books, was the watershed.

As modern Westerners, we have come to views about when and how orality and textuality function best in light of our culture of printed texts. We acknowledge the value of speaking in certain contexts, but for the most part we prefer writing. Opposite to that, the preference on the farm was speaking. Consequently, when we only see what's in the country through the lens of what's in the city, we can end up with erroneous conclusions about their culture, their communication and their literature.[2]

In respect to the Bible, longstanding traditions of interpretation have been based on modern landscapes rather than ancient ones. Most of our logic has been sound, but some of our assumptions have been distorted. Constructing frameworks of ideas on tilted foundations puts the whole structure at risk.

So we're faced with a challenge. Can we hold our ideas less tightly long enough to reconsider some assumptions? It's never easy to reboot a system and start over. After all, our books have been in print for years; our lecture notes are on the Internet; the foundations of our fortresses are nearly immovable. But we need to make our best efforts to reconsider the evidence and the possibilities.

In this chapter we are applying material from previous chapters to the New Testament and to studies of two New Testament genres in particular: Gospels and Letters. Our objective is to understand how the New Testament was composed and produced in light of the available evidence, and in the absence of evidence, to offer the most likely scenarios. We have more confidence in the former and less in the latter, but they both have potential to help us live on the farm long enough to understand more about that culture.

Since our interest in this chapter extends beyond the first century A.D. to the second, we will take one more look at evidence for orality, this time focusing specifically on the second century. Then we will take up the genre of Letters, since they were written first, and then the Gospel genre. Finally, we will propose a reconstruction of the composition and transmission of the New Testament.

Preference for Orality in the Second Century

Adding to what was said in proposition 7 about Plato's aversion to textuality for teaching philosophical principles—while keeping in mind the penchant of the rabbis for oral traditions and oral teaching—we turn to a stylized phrase found in Greco-Roman and Christian literature. It underscores the ongoing importance of orality, even when written texts were available.

The first known reference to "the living voice" appears in the first century A.D.[3] Pliny the Younger, a widely published author, in the course of urging a friend to listen to a speech rather than to read a book, commented that a "living voice" was more effective.[4] Quintilian, a well-known rhetorician also of the first century, claimed that a "living voice" provided more benefit. Galen, in the second century A.D., who rose from being a gladiator physician to court physician in imperial Rome, said that learning out of a book was not even comparable to learning from "a living voice." Nevertheless, in spite of the limitations of written forms he chose to write because it allowed his medical insights to reach a wider audience. But he gave specific instructions: his notes should only be read when a teacher was present to explain them.

Another reference to the living voice is in a third-century anonymous letter to a friend saying that the author wanted his friend to have a reminder of things he had spoken through "the living voice." This calls to mind Paul's comments in his letters about things he had already told his recipients in person. For example, he wrote to the Thessalonians, "Do you not remember that when I was still with you I was telling you these things?" (2 Thess 2:5; cf. 1 Cor 11:2).[5]

Regarding philosophy, the first-century Roman philosopher Seneca said there was more to be gained by hearing "the living voice" than from a written discourse. He also commented that someone reading what another person wrote did not qualify as the living voice. Maybe most significantly, Seneca noted that a philosopher's teachings were added to by his students as they were passed down, though only giving credit to the teacher. In that regard Alexander, citing various sources, notes that this was a common phenomenon: "the received tradition is treated not as an inviolate, fixed body of doctrine but as a developing, organic system open to constant improvement."[6]

Other comments about the limitations of explaining subjects in writing can be found in various Greco-Roman authors. This consistent preference for orality is corroborated by the ever-present "public appetite for 'live' rhetorical performances."[7] All this lends support to the conclusion that the world of early

Christianity placed a high value on oral teaching. It was not only rabbis and Jesus who declined to put their teachings in written form; orality was simply the first choice for dispensing and receiving information. But to consider this an aversion to writing or skepticism of the written word—as some do—is probably going too far; it was a tendency toward aural learning, not a pogrom against textuality. Plato and Galen and many others composed their thoughts in written form because they found it useful to do so. Written texts may have been secondary, but they were not discounted altogether.

In addition to Greco-Roman authors, the rabbis and Jesus, two Christian authors of the second century A.D. expressed preference for oral words over written. Clement was apologetic about what he wrote because it was a poor version of what he learned from noble men via "living words." He wrote, "This discourse is not a carefully crafted writing for public display but . . . an inadequate and colorless representation of the brilliant and living words which I was considered worthy to hear" (*Stromateis* 1.11).[8] Further, Clement notes repeatedly in the introduction to the *Stromateis* the benefits of oral presentation. And as noted in proposition 10, Eusebius reports that Papias wrote, "I do not believe that things out of books are as beneficial to me as things from a living and enduring voice" (*Hist. Eccl*. 3.39.4). In other words, early Christians continued to recognize the value of hearing something over reading it. As Craig Blomberg notes, "oral traditions continued to circulate alongside the written texts until at least the mid-second century and were sometimes even preferred by early Christians as more trustworthy."[9]

This preference for oral forms across ancient culture may seem improbable for those of us steeped in print culture, but the more we understand about ancient oral culture, the more it makes sense. Our particular interest is the sense it made in the transmission of the Christian message and how that sense should influence our understanding of the New Testament.

Paul's Letters

The composition and production of the Letters in the New Testament began long before anyone actually wrote a letter. In the case of Paul, his years of preaching were preparation for composing letters. Along with preaching, he participated in communities that were passing along oral texts of the gospel, a process he almost certainly shared in. And before that, the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' preaching

and deeds shaped the Christian communities' understanding of the faith. All of this was giving Paul a firm grasp on the gospel and an understanding of Christian doctrine.

John the Baptist was a forerunner. Paul, on the other hand, ran in a relay race. He was converted after others had already begun running the race. Yet he quickly caught up and carried the baton of truth well. And as we see especially in regard to Timothy, Paul was intent on passing the baton along to the next runner.

To understand the composition of Paul's letters, the first matter to consider is whether we should refer to them, strictly speaking, as "Paul's letters." Perhaps only five letters were exclusively Paul's. For the others, we need a way to include all the authors: Sosthenes was included as a coauthor of 1 Corinthians; Timothy as a coauthor of 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon; Silas and Timothy as coauthors with Paul of 1-2 Thessalonians; and "all the brothers with me" as coauthors of Galatians. Five letters name Paul as the author without mentioning a coauthor: Romans, Ephesians, 1-2 Timothy and Titus.

Many people assume that it's a misunderstanding that Paul had coauthors, even if the letters on the surface indicate that. The thinking is that while Paul may have appeared to designate colleagues as coauthors, it was really an act of courtesy when Paul included others' names in the address of letters he wrote. But the supposed misunderstanding might actually be the correct understanding. Four lines of evidence favor Paul's associates being coauthors.[10]

While in the opening address of Paul's letters he often included names of friends and associates alongside his name, in his concluding comments he typically mentioned other friends and associates. That raises a question about what the distinction might be between the two groups. If courtesy was the point of both, then was Paul suggesting that one group of friends had priority over another? For example, at the conclusion of his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul sent greetings from Aquila and Priscilla. If the courtesy model were correct, it would seem especially appropriate for Paul to have mentioned these close friends at the beginning of his letter. After all, he had labored alongside them in Corinth for months, he had traveled with them to Ephesus and they had assisted Paul as teachers (Acts 18:1-26). Yet he didn't mention Aquila and Priscilla in the address of the letter. But he did include Sosthenes, perhaps giving him credit as coauthor.

The second line of evidence calls us to imagine a letter that Paul and Peter coauthored. It didn't happen, but it raises fascinating possibilities of what such a

letter might have said. If there were a letter with Paul's and Peter's names in the address portion, we would be quick to assume that this was a truly coauthored letter. Why? Because they were prominent leaders in the early church—apostles, no less—and though there were issues about which they disagreed, we would presume that including both names meant coauthorship. But Sosthenes? Who's that? Why should we consider him to be a coauthor alongside a great leader like Paul? Hopefully you see the point of suggesting such an imaginary letter.

The third line of evidence is the most important of all. There is simply a lack of examples of personal letters from the first century that included people in the letter address for the sake of courtesy. Paul's letter would be unique in this regard. True, there are exceptions to every rule, but the lack of precedent is evidence in favor of the associates that Paul names being actual coauthors.

The fourth line may be the weakest of all, but worth mentioning. As modern individualists, we are inclined to understand the ancient world through our lens of clearly demarcated authorship and copyright. The spirit of community and the practice of collectivism is simply not in our genes, and we don't expect it to be in theirs either. But like it or not, it was. It was certainly a possibility in the closeness of the Christian community to author letters cooperatively. As we will see below, a reconstruction of the literary production of Paul's letters lends credibility to the idea of the content of the letters being shaped by multiple individuals.

On the other hand, evidence against Paul's associates being true coauthors comes from the singular pronouns that appear at various places in the letters. When Paul says, "I don't know if I baptized someone else" (1 Cor 1:16), we would be inclined to think that referred only to Paul's recollection. But "I" and "we" were not used consistently to distinguish between single and multiple authors. We refer to an "editorial we" in English in cases where it is one person speaking or writing who says "we." The same plural pronoun with a singular author could occur in Greek. But in Greek the singular "I" could also be used when more than one person was writing. So Paul's lack of memory of who he baptized may mean that his coauthor Sosthenes didn't know either. The point is that the way pronouns are used may not be entirely convincing evidence for authorship.

The segue and follow-up question to this discussion is obvious: How would authors have collaborated in writing letters? Though sufficient evidence is lacking to answer that question completely, we get a partial answer from understanding the role of an ancient secretary (amanuensis).

In a world of limited literacy, secretaries writing on papyrus with quill pens were commonplace. Many made a living out of their skills; even slaves were trained to read and write on behalf of their masters. With the wide range of levels of literacy (see proposition 5), secretaries were called on to make up the difference between a person's limitations and what the expected level of literacy was for what needed to be written. Documents recording an exchange of goods or registering tax assessments required minimal literacy, yet some secretaries were employed at that level. Personal letters from family member to family member or friend to friend required greater writing skills; secretaries could write these letters on behalf of senders who did not have sufficient literacy. Composing literature or writing official letters demanded the most of authors, and the use of secretaries was very common at this level.

Sometimes an "author" gave a secretary the basic information that he/she wanted a document to say, which may have been written on a wax tablet, and the secretary drafted the appropriate wording. Secretary and author then went over the draft and agreed on necessary changes. Later the secretary returned with a completed copy. In this case, the secretary contributed much to the form and wording of the document, though subject to the author's approval.

In contrast to that example, there could be extremes in both directions. Some authors practically dictated word for word what they wanted a document to say. Others empowered a secretary to write a document and didn't bother to check the draft. The differences were probably not unlike what might be found in corporate offices in the modern Western world. CEOs, politicians and the like may authorize their executive assistants to speak and write on their behalf. In law offices paralegals learn much of the legalese of the profession and compose contracts on behalf of lawyers. Yet this kind of authorship by proxy is not consistently applied. A CEO may want to word the contents of a letter precisely, so the letter is dictated, maybe recorded digitally, and a secretary then enters the spoken words of the proposed letter into a word processor and prints out a copy. The CEO may then mark up the draft so that the letter communicates exactly what is intended.

Regarding Paul's letters, he reveals that a secretary wrote every one: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, which is how I write in every letter" (2 Thess 3:17 NET). By taking the pen in hand and writing a few final words, Paul was in effect signing off, confirming that his authority stood behind the letter even though a secretary penned the letter. In Paul's letter to the Romans, the secretary himself inserted a comment: "I, Tertius, the one writing this letter, send

greetings in the Lord" (Rom 16:22). Paul's reference to the large letters of his own handwriting reveals that he was not skilled as a scribe in writing the carefully formed letters typical of literary texts (Gal 6:11).[11] Unfortunately, we have no clear evidence to what extent Paul's secretaries may have contributed to the writing of the letters. The range of possibilities is large.

The Gospel Genre

Gospel studies over the past two hundred years have explored every possibility imaginable for how the Gospels were produced. The similarities among the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke)—including, in some cases, the same wording in Greek—suggest that they were not independently written but that they borrowed from one another, or borrowed from common sources. On the other hand, differences among the Synoptic Gospels can be just as striking as the similarities, which, for some people, poses serious difficulties (but see proposition 11). Almost all scholars presume some level of literary interdependence among the Gospels, but viewpoints vary widely. For Christians, the inspiration of the Gospels and the reliability of the Gospel records are the most important matters.

Early on, scholars suggested that there must have been an original written Gospel composed in Aramaic, but in three different versions, which the Evangelists (authors of the Gospels) translated into Greek. In place of that idea, it later became popular to hypothesize a wide variety of short written sources that were eventually reworked into Gospels. Next there were two- and four-document hypotheses, proposing that there were larger written sources that formed the basis of the New Testament Gospels.

Beyond these theories (referred to as source criticism), another development was to identify individual units in the Gospels that may have originally been short oral forms (form criticism). These were thought to be fixed texts which the Evangelists copied into their Gospels as if they were written sources.[12] In the last several decades attention has turned to the possibility of more substantive early written collections of Jesus' sayings and deeds, sometimes referred to as Q, M or L, which became the basis for the Gospels.

Alongside these approaches, many scholars have analyzed ways the Evangelists made alterations to sources as they compiled the Gospels (redaction criticism). It's clear that the Evangelists were not simply recording events and

sayings of Jesus' public ministry. They were theologians in their own right, and their Gospels presented different viewpoints on Jesus, especially for the benefit of the audiences to whom they were writing. Blomberg comments that scholars are virtually agreed that "the Gospels were written primarily for theological rather than historical purposes."[13]

The point of this brief review is to note that almost all scholarly work on the Gospels has been undertaken with a patch over one eye. Most scholars have only been able to see things through the lens of modern literary categories. Their other eye was blind to the broader role orality played in the composition of the Gospels. If scholars allowed any room for oral tradition, it was largely relegated to fragmentary forms; short, frequently reported sayings, parables and so forth. The widespread work on the hypothetical document referred to as Q is largely based on a literary assumption.[14]

Three areas of research in recent decades have brought new insights into the discussions of Gospel origins. As Richard Burridge has shown in regard to genres, first-century readers of the Gospels would have understood them to be in the style of biographies in the Greco-Roman world.[15] Based on that conclusion, a question arises regarding variants, such as those in the biographies written by Plutarch (first century A.D.). A simple reading of Plutarch's *Lives* reveals that multiple accounts of the same events could have differing details.[16] If that was accepted practice in the genre of ancient biographies, the question is whether it should be expected in the New Testament Gospels as well. Variants among the Gospels definitely exist (see proposition 11). Perhaps ancient biographies help to explain them.

Second, memory studies since the late 1980s have been examining the function of traditions that are passed on in communities. As people hear stories over time, they become planted in their memories and have a major role in giving definition and identity to communities. Because this kind of memory is not individualistic but community oriented, it is referred to as community, collective or social memory.[17] James Dunn concludes,

> The strength of this new perspective lies in . . . *the character of oral tradition* as it has been illuminated by repeated studies of community tradition (quite different from personal reminiscence) as a combination of stability and flexibility, of stories and teaching material being maintained in identity of subject matter and/or structure and core content, in and through the diversity of detail in sequential performances.[18]

Third, extensive research on orality is challenging traditional paradigms for how the Gospels were produced. If the transmission of the traditions about Jesus were oral for several decades—probably until the writing of the Gospels—and if those oral texts had become substantive rather than single accounts of this or that parable or miracle, then previous attempts to explain the origins of the Gospels need to be reevaluated.

The Composition and Transmission of the Gospels

Based on the evidence discussed above and in preceding chapters, we now turn to a reconstruction of how the New Testament was written.

For the Gospels, the key evidence that undergirds our proposed scenario is as follows.[19]

- The earliest records of the life and ministry of Jesus were oral. They were already being recounted while he was still alive. A representative example is the oral reports of Jesus' resurrection. Luke notes that the women, upon hearing from the angel at the tomb, remembered Jesus' words and returned to tell the Eleven and the rest (Lk 24:8-11). Further, two followers talked as they walked toward Emmaus, rehearsing the events of the resurrection, solidifying their recollections and probably speculating about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. After Jesus joined them, explained the Scripture to them and broke bread, they returned at once to Jerusalem to tell the Eleven about their new understanding of Jesus, especially in light of his fulfillment of the Old Testament (Lk 24:13-35). Luke notes that the Eleven continued talking about this (Lk 24:36), and in the same context Jesus said, "These are my words, which I spoke to you while yet with you. . . . You will be witnesses of these things" (Lk 24:44, 48). In each case these verses are testimony to early oral records of Jesus' words and deeds.
- The oral texts of the gospel were the foundation of the early church. In the book of Acts, after Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost, Luke refers to the early believers' devoting themselves to the "apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). Throughout Acts, Luke records various sermons that were probably condensed versions of the oral texts of the gospel. In other words, the advancement of the kingdom was fully dependent on the

oral proclamation of the good news. Nothing suggests that written words were necessary.

- Oral texts were foundational for the written Gospels. Though scholars representing various viewpoints have theorized that some forms of written accounts of Jesus' life preceded the Gospels, from Luke's prologue we learn that he was the recipient of orally transmitted accounts (Lk 1:1-4). And from John's closing comments in his Gospel we conclude that he bore witness orally, which presumably happened repeatedly over several decades, and that his written version was an extension of his oral texts. Alongside this evidence we must consider, however, the similarity in wording among the three Synoptic Gospels. Was the closeness in wording the result of oral texts being passed along with fixed wording in some portions, which were carefully copied by the Evangelists into their Gospels? Or did Luke, for example, gather evidence for his Gospel from oral eyewitnesses, and in addition borrow wording from Mark and maybe another Gospel? We cannot be sure.
- Many of the variants among the Gospel records are best accounted for by frequent retellings of the oral texts. Ancient oral societies passed along oral texts with a mix of stable traditions and flexible details. While some variants in the Gospel records can be attributed to the Evangelists incorporating various sources into their Gospels and redacting the records for the purpose of each Gospel, it would be unlikely for that to account for the many small differences in detail. As Dunn notes, "In oral tradition performance variation is integral to, even definitive of, the tradition."[20] But this is not to say that substantive changes in the sources occurred as the stories were retold. The treasured teachings of Jesus, which defined the community of believers and which they sought to adhere to, would have been stable and faithfully transmitted.

With those points in mind, we propose a picture of Gospel formation in which the Gospels were first oral, and the written Gospels were a further development of the oral Gospels.

The gospel message began as accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus were passed on by word of mouth in many different settings and by many different people. An enthusiastic understanding of Jesus' unique roles as the new Moses, prophet, suffering Messiah, resurrected Lord, Savior and coming King

compelled followers to spread the good news. For the new movement to succeed, the message of what Jesus said and did was indispensable. And for believers to maintain a unique identity and to know what they were supposed to be and do, the oral texts of what Jesus said and did were to be learned and studied. If the contents of these oral Gospels could not be traced back to the words and deeds of Jesus, then the whole endeavor was falsified.

The earliest witnesses of the gospel were likely Jesus' closest associates.[21] As evident in Acts, Peter, John and James were prominent at first. But soon people like Barnabas, Stephen and Philip became messengers. How many people might have qualified as eyewitnesses is unknown, but the faithful witnessing of Jesus' first followers was the starting point for passing along the truths to others.

The telling and hearing of the stories accomplished many purposes. It was an evangelistic tool for people who were not yet followers. It was the basis of spiritual growth for those already followers (and maybe an early form of "daily devotions"!). For those facing persecution, hearing the words of Jesus was great encouragement. In all cases, those hearing and learning the oral texts of the gospel were allowing God's word to be written on their hearts.

As the stories were told repeatedly within communities and members learned the oral texts, the result was repositories of truth in the communities regarding Jesus and his earthly ministry. As long as there were faithful followers faithfully transmitting the oral texts of the Gospels, the truth was being carefully preserved. This was the primary means by which the gospel message was preserved and passed on in the early church. (The pattern continued at least into the second century, if not for several more centuries, even after the Gospels were committed to written form.)

A further development of communities telling and retelling the oral texts was the possibility of written texts. We do not know when this idea began to find footing in the communities or how widely it caught on, but somewhere in the process, if a community had among their members a scribe, it may have been natural for the scribe to begin making written copies of the stories being told. Or a community may have decided to pay for the services of a scribe to compile written records of their stories.

What the motivation was to begin compiling the oral and/or written texts from one or more communities into a unified record of the life of Jesus is unknown. It's likely that the Old Testament provided a precedent, especially since the events of Jesus' life carried forward the Old Testament story. As the authority of the oral texts of the New Testament message was transferred to

written texts, an implicit canonical consciousness may have been taking shape.[22] The early Christians may also have been influenced by the philosophical literature of the day and the preservation of philosophers' teachings in written form.

It's unlikely that the oral or written texts among various communities matched word for word; variants regarding this and that detail would have been common. But that very comment shows our concern for something that probably wasn't their concern. A faithful preservation of the words and deeds of Jesus probably did not entail an exactitude of wording and details. The written texts of the Gospels show this to be true.

Since the Synoptic Gospels were anonymous as first compiled, we cannot say for certain who was responsible for the composition of the Gospels. As noted above, the author of the third Gospel (traditionally, Luke) tells us that he based his Gospel on oral eyewitness accounts. Papias comments that the apostles passed along oral versions of Jesus' sayings (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.15-16). The clearest evidence for written sources are the literary parallels between his Gospel and those credited to Mark and Matthew. Beyond that it's speculative to think there were other written sources. In any event, Gospel composition was likely a process of planning, compiling, organizing and editing.

That the Evangelists adapted their sources, rearranged the order of events, added seams and transitions and so forth as they composed their Gospels is likely as well. They had specific theological goals in mind and presented different perspectives on Jesus' life and ministry (see above regarding redaction criticism). Thus it was a combination of factors that resulted in the numerous variants among the Gospel accounts.

The Gospel identified in our Bibles as Mark's was probably first. Meanwhile, other persons or groups also began the process of compiling Gospels. The Gospels identified with Matthew and Luke may have been the product of a second phase of Gospel composition. Commonly proposed dates for when these three Gospels were produced are the sixties to eighties A.D. A third phase of Gospel formation probably came late in the first century and resulted in John's Gospel.

The Composition and Transmission of Paul's Letters

A reconstruction of how Paul's letters were written also begins, like the Gospels,

with oral precedents. Paul was a preacher at heart; writing letters came second. What he wrote in his letters was closely tied to what he had preached in person.

The key evidence that shapes our proposed scenario for the composition of the letters comes from the letters themselves (see proposition 12).

- Paul's preaching was rooted in the same kind of oral sources that were the basis of the Gospels. He was the recipient of oral texts of the life of Jesus, and he had likely heard eyewitnesses give firsthand reports.
- In most cases, Paul's letters followed up on his visits to churches. What he had preached in person needed to be affirmed again. For example, he congratulated the church in Thessalonica for the progress they had made in their faith; he admonished the Galatians because they had not stayed true to the gospel he preached.
- Paul's ministry was primarily oral. Textuality was a tool of his orality. Generally only when he could not be present in person did he write letters, and he composed his letters in ways that made him seem as personally present as possible.
- Paul's role as God's mouthpiece gave him confidence to speak divine truth into complex issues that the early churches were facing. This is especially evident in his letters to the church in Corinth.
- Paul did not write his letters independent of colleagues. At some level, he incorporated them into the writing process so that they could be named as coauthors.
- Paul used secretaries to pen his letters. He gives no hint, however, to what extent the secretaries contributed to the content or form of the letters.

Building on that evidence we imagine the letters attributed to Paul being written as follows.

In the course of days and days of travel from one location to another, whether on foot or by ship, and in the months of ministry in locations like Corinth and Ephesus, Paul conversed with Barnabas, Silas, Luke, Timothy and other companions on many topics. They undoubtedly reflected often on the message of the gospel. They considered ways the Old Testament prepared the way for the new covenant. They talked about aspects of their ministry to the churches and the issues that the early Christians were facing. In the course of

remembering, telling and retelling, listening and learning, preaching and re-preaching, discussing and dialoguing, Paul and his friends helped to shape each other's understanding of the faith and the ministry to Jews and Gentiles. As Randolph Richards suggests, "Preaching and debating in the synagogues and marketplaces provided Paul and his team constant opportunity and motivation to rework material. Many of his basic arguments took shape in the crucible of this mission work."[23]

When it occurred to Paul and his companions that it would be appropriate to write letters to certain churches, they may have reviewed what they had preached in the churches—maybe even notes they had compiled (see 2 Tim 4:13)—and considered the best things to say in the proposed letters. Preparing to write the letters may have been a joint endeavor. Richards observes, "It is reasonable that Paul, like other ancient writers, was always in the process of composing, editing and polishing material as he traveled and ministered."[24]

Since it was common in the ancient world for authors to compose letters in conversation with others, Paul probably did not retreat to a secluded location (if he could even find such a place) where he could think and write by himself.[25] Writing letters tended to be a team effort. Paul and selected friends were likely present along with a secretary. The secretary was probably experienced in writing letters and knew about conventions typical of the genre. He or she was also likely skilled in composing wording that would convey the right tone in a letter, especially as the letter would be read aloud to the intended audience(s). Paul's secretaries, when possible, were trusted members of the Christian community (such as Tertius; Rom 16:22). If so, a secretary who was a Christian may have made contributions to the composition of a letter.

While Paul and his companions talked through what they wanted a letter to say, the secretary may have taken notes. If so, he or she would have returned later with a proposed draft. Multiple drafts were likely until every-one agreed that the letter was worded in the best way possible. A process like this may have taken place over several days, depending on how much of the material had been preformed in Paul and his coauthors' minds or in notes. On the other hand, it's entirely possible that Paul and his coauthors dictated word for word what a secretary should write in a letter.

Though Paul apparently gave credit to companions as coauthors of certain letters, his apostolic authority and role as God's mouthpiece were important for the acceptance of the letters by the churches. The singular pronoun "I" may have confirmed his role, even though coauthors participated in constructing some

letters.

Once a completed letter was in hand, it's likely that Paul asked the secretary to make a copy for his use or for his companions. If they would be revisiting a church after sending a letter, it would be helpful to have record of what was said in the letter. Further, it was not uncommon for authors to send multiple copies of letters. So secretaries may have made multiple copies of certain of Paul's letters. The letter to the Galatians, for example, which involved multiple churches, may have been dispatched in multiple copies. (Note that this introduces the possibility of variants even in initial editions of letters.)

The final stage of sending letters was finding a courier to carry the letter to the designated recipients. In many cases that was likely a trusted coworker who not only delivered the letter but also presented it orally before a community of believers. Performances of this sort were common in the Greco-Roman world. The courier also would have the advantage of bringing firsthand greetings from Paul and his coauthors and possibly adding confirmation, explanation or interpretation of a letter's contents.

Conclusion

Understanding the composition of the New Testament in the context of orality is an almost impossible undertaking for modern Western minds. Not only is evidence limited regarding specific phases of the process, but it's also difficult to peel off centuries of layers of textuality and contemplate a world of wheelless automobiles and textless texts.

But we can come to several valid conclusions. Although we have said little throughout this chapter about the inspiration of Scripture, twice Jesus said on the night before his crucifixion that the Holy Spirit would guide his obedient followers into the truth. "The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, the one whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and will remind you of all the things which I told you" (Jn 14:26). "When that one comes, the Holy Spirit of truth, he will guide you into all the truth" (Jn 16:13). Though the process of inspiration may have involved more twists and turns than we're inclined to expect, the memories and oral and written texts of faithful believers were under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We can have confidence that the early Christians were transmitting divine truth.

Further, as also stated by Jesus on the night before his crucifixion, God was

empowering the disciples to take on much of the role that Jesus himself had held during his public ministry. “The one who has faith in me, that one will do the works that I am doing, and he will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father” (Jn 14:12). We can agree with Michael Kruger that the early church became the “revelational deposit” and “matrix of theological beliefs.”[26]

The early church may not have realized the extent to which they were under divine guidance and authority as they recounted oral texts of the gospel night after night, as they preached the gospel from city to city and as they recorded divine truth in written Gospels and letters to churches. But from God’s perspective, there was a sense that they were doing even *greater works* than Jesus himself. When their oral texts became written texts, we can infer that the same revelational deposit and matrix of theological beliefs applied to the written forms.

But we must not presume that the written texts replaced the oral texts. As shown above and in proposition 13, oral and written continued side by side into the second century and probably beyond. Both were reliable representations of divine truth, and the early scribes making copies of manuscripts felt free to draw from oral and written traditions.

Part 4

Concluding Affirmations on the Origin and Authority of Scripture

Proposition 18

Affirmations About the Origin of Scripture Confirm Its Fundamental Oral Nature

Mama, how does God talk?

Sometimes he whispers in a still, small voice.
Like when you hold a seashell to your ear.
Sometimes he roars over the water and his glory thunders.

Like a lion, Mama?

Yes, a great, kind lion.

NANCY WHITE CARLSTROM,
DOES GOD KNOW HOW TO TIE SHOES?

The voice of the Lord thunders over the mighty waters . . . the voice of the Lord breaks the cedars . . . strikes with flashes of lightning . . . twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

PSALM 29

Scientists conclude that the universe is a staggering 46 billion light years across and still expanding. Whether it's really getting bigger, or the Hubble Space Telescope is just discovering more of it, what we can already "see" is more than enough. God is infinite. Might his universe be too? Certainly it's beyond comprehension. The human brain is too small. The cosmos is too big.

If the universe overwhelms our cognitive abilities, the Designer and Creator of the universe does so all the more. Our brains are Tinkertoys in comparison to DNA, matchsticks in comparison to birthing galaxies. The divine genius and creativity reduce all scientific calculation, philosophical supposition and theological postulation to nursery rhymes. We can only let God be God.

Necessarily, everything about deity is mind-boggling mystery.[1] It couldn't be any other way. Understand God? Too much effort to do so and too much

confidence that we have done so would be arrogance. Isaiah would call it idolatry (Is 29:14-16). He immortalized the mystery of deity with the famous words, “Who can know the mind of the Lord?” (Is 40:12-31). So left to our own devices, God will always be the Uncreated who cannot be described.[2]

But if it be the case that the Uncreated should devise a means to reveal himself to the created, then everything changes. Fortunately, he did, and it has: God spoke, and everything changed. A speaking God is a revealing God. Fundamental to faith are the twin notions that God speaks and we listen. “If God were to speak to us in divine language, no one would be able to understand him; but ever since creation, he, in condescending grace, speaks to us and manifests himself to us in human fashion.”[3]

Before exploring these ideas further, we need to pause and explain the purpose of the present chapter (as well as the next one). Having examined a variety of evidence that pertains to the production of Scripture, it’s only right that we would test our propositions and conclusions with what the Bible says about itself. We must be virtuous and faithful readers, not skeptics; we certainly do not want to come to false conclusions. So in this chapter we are focusing on two key texts pertaining to inspiration: Hebrews 1 and 2 Peter 1.

The Prime Form of Divine Revelation

The book of Hebrews, apparently a sermon, takes us back to the beginning with its opening line: “Long ago—in many times and various ways—God spoke” (Heb 1:1). It’s an important premise leading into an amazing paragraph.[4] As Karen Jobes notes, in contrast to the crux of sin recorded in Genesis 3, in which God’s word was rejected in favor of the serpent’s word, the author of Hebrews appeals to his audience to reject Satan’s word in favor of God’s.[5]

Spoken to an audience marked by weak praise and uncertain faith, the prologue to the sermon is a hymn of exaltation, a theological primer on divine sonship. God’s speaking *in* the prophets and *in* his Son is presented as all the same.[6] With the voice heard from Mt. Sinai, God empowered Moses to speak with divine authority (Ex 19:3-6; Heb 9:19). With the voice heard at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, God authorized his Son as the “radiance of his glory and the representation of his essence” (Mt 3:17; 17:5; Heb 1:3). At the conclusion of the prologue, the preacher in Hebrews summons hearers to listen carefully so that they do not drift away and fall off the spiritual cliff (Heb 2:1).

Not only in the first line but multiple times throughout the prologue God's speech acts are cited, mentioned more frequently here than anywhere else in Scripture. No other text ties together God's speaking and divine revelation so closely. In Hebrews 1, God speaks to his Son, about his Son, to the angels, about the angels and to us. It is evident that God-speech is the modus operandi of divine revelation, the primordial drama, the antecedent proposition. The *Voice* laid the foundation stone, the *Voice* became incarnate, and the *Voice* will put on the capstone:[7]

> God said, "Let there be light." (Gen 1:3)
>
> The oral message became flesh and tabernacled among us. (Jn 1:1)
>
> He said, "All is finished; I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." (Rev 21:6)

Continuing throughout his sermon, the preacher of Hebrews repeatedly refers to God's speech. And bracketing the sermon, he concludes with strong warnings against not listening to God speaking—especially knowing that God's voice thundered from Mt. Sinai, leaving people begging him to stop, and recognizing that God's voice will again shake the earth and the heavens (Heb 12:18-20, 25-27).

God's speaking is a captivating image both beautiful and good. But it's also a mystery. What does heavenly communication consist of? As humans, we assume speaking entails words and sounds. But the notion of God speaking to his Son or to the angels is a realm beyond our understanding. When the mystery of God-speech extends to communication between heaven and earth, we realize that in order for God to speak to us, he must speak our language. Conversation partners need to have much in common. This is beyond understanding.

As Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall advise in their book, *The Mystery of God*, while divine revelation focuses on unfolding the mysteries of heavenly truth, a mystery made known does not cease being mysterious.[8] The idea that mystery hides what is knowable—and we must uncover the unknown so that everything is knowable—misses the point of the mystery of deity. There is simply too much of God to comprehend. His nature does not lend itself to even the most sophisticated rational thinking of humans. He is nearly ungraspable.

But we need not fear mystery, for it does not mean that there is no "full-blooded truth to be articulated."[9] Boyer and Hall classify five kinds of mystery,

the last being "*an unclassifiable superabundance* that transcends but does not invalidate rational explanation."[10] Mystery can be a liberating theological reality. We're not expected to systematically explain all truth about God. Actually, we probably try too hard to do so, since the closer we come to explanation, the further we move from veneration. Often the more logic, the less wonder. (Or quoting an advertisement for a children's zoo, "The smaller you are, the bigger the awesome.")

Above all else, the incomprehensible, unfathomable, transcending superabundance of God's speech is an essential part of our relationship with him. It draws us in.[11] Mystery leads to awe, and awe to reverence, and reverence to worship.

The Human Form of Divine Speech

In addition to the book of Hebrews, the subject of God speaking is addressed by Peter, though he takes the matter in a different direction. His concern is God speaking through humans. Whereas Adam and Eve were recipients of *unspoiled* communication before sin and the consequent separation, God chose poets, prophets and apostles to be recipients of *inspired* communication. In the latter case, the limitations that were the consequence of sin needed to be overcome in order for God to speak through human representatives. It was a special empowering of the Holy Spirit. Once again, there is mystery: the process is beyond rational explanation.

Like Paul's second letter to Timothy, Peter's second letter was written near the end of his ministry.[12] He wrote to an unidentified group of people who were remarkably credited with having a faith on par with his own (1 Pet 1:1). The overall purpose of the letter is stated in the context of Peter saying that he had only a limited amount of time left to minister.

> I will constantly keep reminding you of these things even though you already know them and are well-grounded in the present truth. As long as I'm still in this tent, I consider it appropriate to call things to your remembrance, knowing that it is soon time for my tent to be taken down, as our Lord Jesus Christ has revealed to me. I will go all out so that after my departure—regardless of the situation—you may have recollection of these things. (2 Pet 1:12-15; cf. 3:1-2)

Because of false teachers, Peter's message was especially urgent and important. A suitable analogy would be a mother with terminal cancer who is concerned about the peer pressure that her teenage children will face after she is gone, so she writes a tearful letter of love and encouragement. Peter is in a similar situation and shares from the depths of his heart as he thinks ahead to the needs of his audience and the peer pressure (false teaching) they will face after his departure.

Immediately after expressing his greetings, Peter sets the tone for his letter by highlighting God's power, glory and excellence (2 Pet 1:3). If false teaching is to be exposed, if Christians are to grow in faith and godliness, if heresy is to be recognized for what it is, recognizing God's supremacy is the place to begin. One of the things false teachers were claiming was that there would not be a second coming (e.g., 2 Pet 1:16; 3:10). In response, Peter appeals to two bedrock ideas: his experience as eyewitness to Jesus' transfiguration, which anticipated Jesus' return; and what the prophets had said, which supported the second coming.

To heighten the impact of his prose, Peter invigorates it with poignant adjectives and images (2 Pet 1:16-21).

- Being eyewitnesses of his *grandeur*. The Greek term by itself denotes something in the superlative. In this case it refers to the unparalleled majesty of something beyond comprehension, a display of awesomeness that cannot be matched. Visitors to ancient Egypt beholding a pyramid for the first time were eyewitnesses of earthly grandeur. But this surpasses that: this is otherworldly magnificence.
- The *Majestic Glory*. In contrast to the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' transfiguration, which only state that a voice came out of the cloud, Peter gives that voice a name above all names; it could be translated the *Sublime Splendor*. Jesus' transfiguration was no minor monument on the landscape of his earthly ministry. It was a defining moment and was particularly relevant to Peter's point: the transfiguration prefigured Jesus' return in preeminent glory.
- A light shining in a *dark place*. In the ancient world, where there was no electricity, darkness was more oppressive than moderns can imagine. Little oil lamps didn't give off much light, but in the darkness of a cave or tomb, for example, they were lifesavers. The message of the prophets was even more life giving and enlightening.

- *Until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts*. Peter now uses a figure of speech that is not easily paraphrased in straightforward prose, suggesting that he intends it to be cognitive and evocative. The word for *morning star*, "light-bringer," would have brought to mind the planet Venus rising, as it often does, just before dawn. It is likely an allusion to the anticipation associated with Christ's return. It's an example of Peter wanting to speak an idea into the souls of his listeners, so he implants an image deep into their hearts.
- Not by the prophet's own *imagination*. Inspiration in the ancient world was often associated with spiritual possession, frenzy and ecstatic utterances. In contrast to what people knew of such pagan practices associated with ancient oracles, divine revelation was clearly not that.

With those images in mind, Peter offers his primary affirmation. Although not citing a specific prediction from the prophets about Jesus' second coming, he appeals to the message of the prophets, affirming that theirs was not some willy-nilly invention about the day of the Lord dawning and the morning star rising. The prophecies found in Scripture, Peter declares, were not of human creation, but were the product of "men being moved by the Holy Spirit and speaking from God" (2 Pet 1:21). The point here is not that God spoke, as was stated in Hebrews, but by extension that humans could speak for God. The speaking was empowered by the Holy Spirit; its source was God himself.

Following Peter's thought closely, we see that his aural experience at the transfiguration, which anticipated Jesus' return, is confirmed by the aural experience of hearing the prophets. Both hearing the voice from the cloud on the holy mountain and hearing the message of the prophets provided assurance of Jesus' return.[13]

We must beware, however, of extracting more from Peter's affirmation than he intended. Two common conclusions need to be reconsidered. By referring to the prophets, Peter's purview did not extend to all the authors of the Old Testament. In the context of defending Jesus' second coming, Peter specifically had in mind prophecy (in support of this, see 1 Pet 1:10-12). Second, Peter's point was not that the written text of Scripture was inspired. Although that was a consequence, since the messages of the prophets became part of Scripture, Peter's focus was the precursor to written Scripture. He was affirming the inspiration of the oral proclamation of the prophets. What God's spokesmen proclaimed bore divine authority.

Yet we can make a legitimate deduction: if what the prophets said was a message from God—which Peter says it was—and if what the prophets said was reflected in written form, then we can deduce that the written form would have represented God's voice as well. Further, it was generally assumed in the biblical world that there was little difference between oral and written texts; both could be equally authoritative. But the point remains that Peter's primary focus was the oral text of the prophets and what the prophets said in support of Jesus' return.

Conclusion

God-speech is the prime form of communication—the precursor of all communication and the conclusion of all communication. At its most basic level, the sum and substance of divine revelation is speech. God's speaking is the origin of inspiration, and notwithstanding the mysteries involved, God-speech is "full-blooded" truth.

For divine revelation to be heard by the earth's population—short of God broadcasting it himself in some sort of universal language—God empowered select representatives to pass his spoken word along to a wider audience. The path to humans passes through humans. Divine illocution passes through human locution. But even more mysterious, the path is somehow authoritative. Activated by the Holy Spirit, humans became channels for communication from heaven to earth.

For the author of Hebrews and for Peter, there is no doubt that they had a high view of divine revelation. They knew what God said because God had spoken. They understood that humans can speak on God's behalf.

Proposition 19

Affirmations About the Authority of Scripture Assert Its Divine Source and Illocution

Word pictures appear many places in Scripture, adding beauty and power to divine revelation. As part of the literary skill of authors, they provide force and energy, resonating with our souls. They animate concepts so that they penetrate our consciousness in ways straightforward statements cannot.

- I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. (Ex 19:4)
- Circumcise the foreskin of your hearts and do not be stiff-necked any longer. (Deut 10:16)
- Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name because you belong to the Messiah, I assure you that person will never lose his reward. (Mk 9:41)
- Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God. (Lk 9:60)
- I saw Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. (Lk 10:18)
- I came to throw fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! (Lk 12:49)
- The tongue is a fire. The tongue is a world of wickedness among the parts of our bodies. It pollutes the whole body and sets fire to the course of human existence and is set on fire by hell. (Jas 3:6)

Word pictures—figures of speech, metaphors, metonymy, motifs and the like—are the heart-language of the Bible. They call us to stop moving and doing, and to ponder, to imagine. We think "God-breathed" was intended by the apostle Paul as a word picture (2 Tim 3:16). Thus to understand Paul's image it will help us to consider briefly how metaphorical language functions.

One of the best resources for appreciating figures of speech in the Bible is the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*.[1] In the introduction the editors observe that "the Bible is much more a book of images and motifs than abstractions and

propositions."[2] Yet it's only in recent decades that we have come to understand more of the reasons for God's communicating in word pictures. The left side of our brains tends to grasp factual and analytical reasoning; the right side, multisensory and evocative imagery. Thus if we only use one side of our brains we may miss the intended impact of Scripture.

The Bible primarily relates truth through narratives of human experience and through poetic language that transcends the normal boundaries of expression. In both cases, the right side of the brain must function well to grasp the full counsel of God. As Alonso Schökel notes, "What has been written with imagination, must also be read with imagination, provided the individual has imagination and it is in working order."[3]

Unfortunately, "because of the predominantly theological and devotional purposes to which Christians put the Bible, it is almost impossible not to slip into the error of looking upon the Bible as a theological outline with prooftexts attached."[4] Or to express that thought another way: in biblical genres like law, history, Gospel and letter, word pictures are often nestled amid the phrases and clauses of straightforward prose. The images are unexpected and seem to jump off the page. The reverse is true in poetic genres such as Wisdom literature, psalms and prophecy in poetic verse: we should read these portions of Scripture with the assumption that figures of speech are the norm rather than the exception. As will be seen below, recognizing how metaphors function is fundamental to understanding Paul's affirmation of inspiration. But before we get to that, we need to take into account how and when Paul used heightened metaphoric language.

This chapter continues the direction indicated in the previous chapter. We are seeking to understand carefully what Scripture has revealed about itself so that we do not come to wrong conclusions based on our examination of ancient literary production and what we have discovered about the phenomena of the Bible itself. So this chapter is focusing on 2 Timothy 3 and Paul's statement about the inspiration of Scripture.

Figurative and Emotive Language in Paul's Letters

When Paul wanted to impress an idea on his hearers, he ramped up the power of his communication. He challenged the believers in Philippi to "shine like stars in the universe" (Phil 2:15). It was typical of Paul to speak metaphorically,

sometimes charged with emotion.

In 2 Corinthians Paul composed an extended defense of his apostolic ministry. He had come under attack, so he responded with a carefully orchestrated justification of who he was and what he was seeking to accomplish. He gave thanks to God for leading him in "triumphal procession" as he traveled far and wide spreading the good news (2 Cor 2:14). Triumphal processions in the city of Rome were famous (or infamous, depending on whether you identified with the victor or the spoils).[5] On the order of modern-day ticker-tape parades, they celebrated great military victories in grand style. Paul's point in using this metaphor is that a triumphal procession was comparable to his apostolic ministry. But in this case, as Scott Hafemann contends, Paul is picturing himself not as the victor showing off the spoils of war but as one of the spoils himself, shackled and forced to march in the parade.[6]

Continuing in the same sentence Paul refers to himself both as the fragrance and aroma of Christ, whether among those being saved or those perishing (2 Cor 2:15). He develops that point even further stating, "To some we are the fragrance from death to death, and to others the fragrance from life to life; now who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor 2:16). "For we are not like so many others, hucksters who peddle the word of God for profit" (2 Cor 2:17 NET). This imagery is particularly poignant, for triumphs in Rome proceeded to the temple, where captured and shackled enemy leaders were slain. Death truly hung in the air, but for those being saved it was the fragrance of life![7] So the imagery of Paul's self-defense is evocative, helping hearers to sense his passion and to appreciate his role.

Consider as well Paul's letter to the Galatians. He was engaged in an epic battle for the true gospel. The enemy was counterfeit gospels. In his strongly worded emotional appeal, Paul confronts those who were proclaiming a false gospel and boldly announces that if he—or even an angel from heaven—should preach heresy, then "let him be eternally condemned" (Gal 1:8). Saying this once was not enough; in the very next sentence he reiterates the same pronouncement of judgment: "let him be eternally condemned" (Gal 1:9). Later in his letter Paul confronts the Galatians with the accusation that they had been "bewitched" (Gal 3:1). The term referred to the practice of magic, especially using an evil eye to bring someone under evil powers. Again the language speaks to the right side of the brain as well as to the left.

Turning to the second letter to Timothy, Paul's tone was particularly somber and ominous. He was imprisoned in Rome, chained like a criminal, and expected

a death sentence at his next trial (2 Tim 2:9). Disappointingly, at his first trial he was abandoned by friends; no one testified in his behalf (2 Tim 4:16). He reports that everyone in the province of Asia had already deserted him (2 Tim 1:15). He even names a metal worker, Alexander, who did him great harm (2 Tim 4:14). Paul's heavy heart is especially evident in his word picture: "I am being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near" (2 Tim 4:6). We feel the burdens pressing down on Paul.

Not only were these portentous days for Paul personally, it appeared they could be potentially problematic for the legacy of his ministry. The issue focused on whether what Paul had accomplished would be carried on, and if so, how. Timothy, his heir apparent, would face suffering, youthful desires, foolish arguments, difficult people, false teachers and severe opposition (2 Tim 2:3; 2:22-23; 3:2-9; 4:15). It seems that imposters were hiding in the shadows waiting to pounce as soon as Paul's voice was silenced. Again Paul's word pictures are vivid: the false teachers sneak into homes like critters; their teachings eat away souls like gangrene eats flesh (Greek: "their teaching will spread like gangrene"); those who listen to false teaching will have itching ears to hear more (2 Tim 3:6; 2:17; 4:3).

In this context, it was essential that Timothy appreciate the enduring value of all that he had been taught and that he pass it on. Paul urged Timothy to continue in the truth he had become convinced of; to keep what he had learned from Paul as the pattern of sound teaching; to keep reminding God's people of the truth; to not be ashamed of the gospel and to be willing to suffer for it (2 Tim 3:14; 1:13; 2:14; 1:8). Paul said Timothy should "guard the good deposit that was entrusted" to him (the word picture is of someone entrusting property to another person's care); and Paul challenged Timothy to "fan into flames the gift of God which is in you" (2 Tim 1:14; 1:6). Thus, as in the aforementioned contexts of emotional intensity, Paul consistently uses strong word pictures to communicate to his readers.

The Context of Paul's Statement about Inspiration

The flow of Paul's thought leading up to his statement that Scripture is God-breathed is not difficult to follow. With the threat of false teachers hoping to mislead his young protégé, Paul sought to encourage Timothy to have complete confidence in the oral texts of his teachers and in the written texts of the Holy

Scriptures and to remain steadfast in his commitment to teach those ideas to others.[8] Timothy could have this confidence based on two factors: the reliability of the sources of his learning, which were teachers he knew well;[9] and the effectiveness of the Scriptures for equipping the saints, which he had been familiar with for a long time.

A paraphrase of 2 Timothy 3:14-17 might read something like this:

> Timothy, you will need to hold on tight to everything you've been taught. There's no doubt that what you learned was true because it came from people you know and trust. And based on your knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, you understand the power and effectiveness of Scripture in leading people to faith and helping them to become mature. Keep in mind that Scripture is a message straight from the heart of God and by teaching it you can equip God's people for the tasks ahead.

Paul's discourse was like a commencement address: before sending his graduate off, he sought to prepare him for what lay ahead. Or he was like a retiring coach: Paul was giving his successor a pep talk about how to lead the struggling team forward. Even more to the point: Paul was in effect writing his last will and testament and encouraged his son to assume his mantle in spite of impending difficulties. The specific genre of this letter is probably farewell discourse, thus situating 3:14-17 in the context of a strong emotional appeal.

Analyzing the structure of the passage, it appears that verses 16-17 are parenthetical. The absence of a connective at the beginning of verse 16 (such as *and*) supports this suggestion.[10] Further, these two verses are set off from the commands that precede and follow (2 Tim 3:14 and 4:2; note that there are no imperatives in 3:16-17).

Additionally, Paul uses several parallel concepts to link his thoughts together:[11]

- Timothy learning from his teachers (v. 14) is parallel with knowing the Holy Scriptures (v. 15).
- Timothy's confidence in what his teachers taught (v. 14) is parallel with his confidence in what he learned from the Scriptures (v. 15).
- "Holy Scriptures" (v. 15) is parallel with "all Scripture" (v. 16).
- The function of the Holy Scriptures, "to make you wise for salvation" (v. 15), is parallel with the function of all Scripture, "useful for teaching,

rebuking, correcting, training and equipping" (v. 16).

- Paul's expectation that Timothy would pass on to others what his teachers taught is parallel with the Scriptures being useful for teaching (3:16-17 and 4:2).

Paul was stressing two ideas: reliability and relevance. Timothy could be completely confident in the reliability of the knowledge he possessed because it was based on what he had learned from both his teachers and from Scripture. And both the oral texts of his teachers and the written text of Scripture were relevant for passing on to others.[12]

Paul's Intent in Stating That Scripture Is God-Breathed

Several possibilities for the illocution of the term *God-breathed* need to be considered. The term occurs only here in the Bible and apparently does not appear in Greek literature before Paul's time, making it likely that Paul coined the term.[13] Etymologically, *God-breathed* is a combination of two words, *God* and *breath*/*spirit*.

The term fits Paul's pattern of using word pictures to underscore important ideas, especially in emotional contexts. Paul had a very high view of Scripture, and given the threat of false teaching, it was of utmost urgency that Timothy place a similar high value on written Scripture (*graphē*) and its role in transforming people's lives.[14] The left sides of our brains rightly hear Paul declaring that God was the source of all Scripture, affirming that Scripture is invested with God's authority. Thus the term "aims at describing the relation between the invisible God and the visible Scripture."[15]

But as a wordsmith, Paul probably intended *God-breathed* to be an evocative metaphor, in the sense of implanting something more into Timothy's consciousness. The term is an occasion for all readers to stop and ponder the energy and mystery of the image. If the left sides of our brains rightly grasp the point that God is the source of Scripture, the right sides of our brains need to engage with the metaphor of God breathing or God in-spiriting through those written words.[16]

As a cognitive image, Paul may have been conveying the notion that Scripture came from the very heart of God. It is God's thoughts and ways, which people need to accept as informative and transformative for their lives. This idea

suits the context of Paul's focusing on the power and usefulness of Scripture. As Guthrie notes, "Timothy is not being informed of the inspiration of Scripture, for this doctrine was commonly admitted by Jews, but he is being reminded that the basis of its profitableness lies in its inspired character."[17]

But as an affective image, Paul likely sought to convey an indelible image of Scripture as the *breath* of heaven. God-breathed may well have pointed to the Spirit's power in Scripture (cf. 1 Cor 2:4). If we translate the term as "God-spirited" instead of "God-breathed," we may ask, What unleashes the power of Scripture? The answer would be that it is the Spirit empowering the words of Scripture and softening the hearts of hearers so that the words of God can be effectual. "The Scripture has its power . . . because of the Spirit/breath that produced it and presumably continues to vivify it."[18]

But frankly, we may try too hard to define concretely an evocative term, as if the left side of the brain needs to determine how the right side should be affected by the image. If the imagery of a metaphor can be paraphrased, then it's unlikely that we have experienced the depth of its affective illocution. Interpreting poetic imagery is not an exact science, if *interpreting* is even the right word. And we must always beware of understanding *God-breathed* simply based on etymology.[19] Our ultimate focus should be its illocution, which in this context was to underscore Scripture's power and potential to change lives:

> Every Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for ever good work. (2 Tim 3:16-17 NET)

"Thus to have said that the Scripture is 'enspirited by God' is to have implicitly said that men have been thus 'enspirited.'"[20]

Coming at the term from another direction, was Paul's point to make a declaration about the process of inspiration, or about a specific doctrine of Scripture beyond an affirmation of its source and authority?[21] According to the context, Paul's focus was exhortation.[22] If we were to ask how Paul was defining *God-breathed*, since he did not gloss the word with a comparable term, we would find the clearest evidence in how he defined the function of inspired Scripture. By analogy, if a father were to say, "My teenage daughter is talented," we would want to know what he meant by *talented*. And he might respond that she has exceptional musical ability and is a virtuoso pianist. The fact of her

talent is a quality she holds, but until we know the form it takes, her talent is undefined. Or, if someone were to say, "This invention is brilliant," that announces a certain quality, but until we hear what the invention does we do not understand the full meaning of *brilliant*. Paul declares the fact of Scripture's inspiration but focuses on how that is defined by its function.

We believe it is correct to understand Paul's coined word in three ways: it affirms that God is the source of Scripture; it evokes images of God's communicative breath or Spirit; and most importantly it leads to the illocution of Scripture's transforming power. Since Paul invented the word, since it is probably evocative, since etymology may not be a good measure of meaning, our best evidence for the word's propositional content is how Paul defined its function.

For those, on the other hand, who think Paul was offering an early form of bibliology, they would have to conclude that he was declaring the current form of the text of Scripture inspired (the Septuagint), apart from the issues of the original language or the state of preservation of the text.[23] The text that Timothy knew—the result of migrating through the hands of various scribes and being translated into Greek—would be the referent of "Scripture" (*graphē*).[24] (There's certainly nothing to suggest that Paul had in mind a form of the autographs.)

Paul follows up his comment about Scripture being God-breathed by commanding Timothy to preach the word (*logos*) (2 Tim 4:2). Our tendency may be to assume that Paul has the written word in mind, but based on proposition 12 earlier, he is referring to the oral text of God's truth.

Was the authority of oral texts, such as what Paul and others had passed on to Timothy—and which Timothy was now commissioned to pass on to others—comparable to the authority of the written text of the Old Testament? Paul's point was to assure Timothy that he could have complete confidence in *both* oral and written texts. There is no evidence that Paul was suggesting, "What we said was one thing; what comes to us in writing from God trumps everything."

However, those of us under the influence of a text-dominant culture may be inclined to respond, "But Paul did say *God-breathed* about the written text, and he didn't say that about the oral texts." That logic fails, however, because the context does not suggest that Paul wanted Timothy to have greater confidence (or less confidence) in one over the other. Further, although only implied here, elsewhere Paul explicitly claimed divine source for his oral texts (e.g., 1 Cor 2:13).

Did Paul recognize a difference between his oral texts and his own written

text, in this case, a difference between what he said in person to Timothy and what he communicated in writing? In other words, “Timothy, what I’m saying in this letter supersedes anything I said when we were face to face”? There is simply no evidence to support that notion.

Conclusion

The issues surrounding Paul’s term *God-breathed* are complex, and we cannot develop definitive answers here (if anyone can anywhere). But we can at least affirm that Paul was tutoring Timothy on the importance of proclaiming divine truth to the community of believers, as evident both in oral and written sources. There should be no doubt: Scripture is *God-breathed* in the sense that its source is God, in the sense that it communicates in powerful ways and in the sense that it has life-transforming authority. At the very least we need to make sure that we are not guilty of removing *God-breathed* from its context and ignoring its authorial intent, thus opening the door to misunderstanding (see 2 Tim 2:15).

There is no evidence in this passage that Paul was seeking to place the written text of Scripture on a higher level of authority than the oral texts. Viewed from the perspective of oral culture, why would he? The oral and written texts in which Timothy had been trained were viewed as equally authoritative and were essential instruction for the community of believers. Paul’s point was not to provide the ultimate definition of a doctrine of written Scripture. He was enjoining Timothy to entrust to others what he had learned from Paul’s preaching, to use Scripture in building up the body of believers and to preach the *logos*, the oral message of the gospel (2 Tim 2:2; 4:2).

It’s a fitting reminder that both divine *and* human agency are essential for building up the body of Christ. God’s activity of breathing truth and human activity of proclaiming truth are interdependent. If not proclaimed, God’s activity goes for naught. If not God-breathed, human activity goes for naught.

The illocution of *God-breathed* was to validate the authority and importance of Scripture for teaching and preaching. The perlocution was how that truth would be deeply entrenched in the minds of the hearers. But none of that matters if no one gives Scripture a voice in the community by “teaching, rebuking, correcting, training and equipping.”

Proposition 20

Inerrancy Has Essential Roles and Limitations

We have now discussed what we know from the ancient world regarding literary production and some of the major biblical genres. Along the way we have suggested some of the ways our understanding of biblical authority might be affected by understanding that ancient world. Now we turn more directly to issues of inerrancy and authority. Our intention is to strengthen the doctrine of biblical authority through a realistic application of knowledge about the ancient world, and to understand what inerrancy can do and what it can't do.

Descriptive terms that carry rhetorical power often have a shelf life. They can be exploited, manipulated, commandeered, caricatured, distorted, sloganized and subverted so that they no longer serve the rhetorical purpose for which they were initially adopted (e.g., *catholic*, *orthodox*, *fundamentalism*). *Inerrancy* is one of those terms, and it may be reaching its limits. But even if this is so, the convictions it sought to express and preserve remain important. We may need to find alternate ways to express them that will embrace faith while recognizing nuances that continuing study and discussion have necessitated. The church needs a robust expression of biblical authority and an ever-adjusting answer to skepticism in all of its varied forms.

Inerrancy is no longer the clear, defining term it once was. Its semantic qualities have made it a strong and useful descriptor, but some have also found it almost infinitely pliable,[1] even though extensive attempts have been made to define it.[2] Its pliability comes largely from the fact that it is a term that pertains specifically to meaning, as is evident in the ICBI qualifier that the biblical text is inerrant "in all it affirms" (i.e., in the meaning properly derived from its illocutionary direction). To know what the text affirms, an interpreter has to decide its meaning. At the same time, the term has been recognized as patently inapplicable to several genres (e.g., proverbial literature[3]). It has been widely adopted by evangelicals mainly to protect historical narrative in reaction to the modernist controversies in which critical scholarship began to scoff at the historical claims of the Bible.[4] Moses, Abraham and David had come to be labeled as little more than figments of the exilic imagination. The exodus

became a nonevent. The historical Jesus was deemed elusive and represented in mere fragments. It is no wonder that those who believed the Bible to be the inspired, authoritative revelation of God sought terminology to express their convictions in a way that would combat these attacks.

If we question the continued sufficiency of the term *inerrancy,* it is *not* that we now admit that the Bible *has* errors—it is rather that the term *inerrancy* may no longer be clear enough, strong enough or nuanced enough to carry the weight with which it has traditionally been encumbered. We continue to believe that if the biblical communicator shows evidence of believing that he is talking about real people and real events in a real past, we gladly affirm that he is neither deceived nor being deceptive. Truthfulness remains an important criterion. If the term *inerrancy*, however, has become diminished in rhetorical power and specificity, it no longer serves as adequately to define our convictions about the robust authority of Scripture.

Some have accused modern evangelicalism of being a "cult of the book," and maybe there are pockets of that extreme.[5] But the fact that the Bible can be venerated to excess does not obviate the foundational role that it has in our doctrine. If the Bible does not offer the Word of God, no other doctrines are secure. Much of the claimed knowledge of God in world religions throughout history has derived from the speculations, opinions, inferences and deductions of those recognized as "spiritual"—whether mystics or philosophers. But human guesses, regardless of their source, inspire little confidence. If what we claim to know about God is built only on the accumulated wisdom and insight of human beings, we must admit that we know little of God. But Christianity has made a different claim—that the information we have about God comes from God himself (2 Pet 1:20-21). It is therefore absolutely essential that we embrace the Bible as the Word of God. But the question remains, How is it the Word of God? And it is the church's responsibility to work out all the complex implications of that question. As generation after generation of Christians study the Bible and ponder its nature, it is inevitable that new insights and distinctions will arise that must be addressed. As skeptics find new accusations to register and new reasons to dismiss the Bible as unworthy of the belief about it that Christians embrace, new formulations need to be proposed—not by way of compromise, but by way of clarification.

Evangelicals who support the concept of inerrancy have undoubtedly been guilty at times of claiming too much for the term and claiming that we know too much (e.g., about what historical accuracy demanded and about what authorship

entailed). But critical scholarship is not innocent of similar unwarranted certainty and belief in "assured results" as they apply the surgical knife to biblical books with such self-confidence.

Inerrancy Versus Inspiration and Authority

Inerrancy as a descriptive term of doctrinal belief covers different territory than its related words *inspiration* and *authority*. Inspiration identifies the source of the communication and applies to the text (the locution). Whatever interpreters determine the meaning of the text to be, inspiration affirms that the message is embodied in words (*graphē*) that come from God through human communicators. Authority identifies the claim on the reader and applies to our response to those claims. Both inerrancy and authority are inseparably vested in the intentions of the human communicator (an unnecessary qualifier for inspiration).[6] In contrast to both inspiration and authority, inerrancy deals with meaning and can only be discussed in light of the intended illocution; thus it is entangled in interpretation, genre and hermeneutics. This fact makes it a far more difficult term to manage. Since the concept is founded on interpretation of meaning, its claims relevant to particular contexts can be undermined or subverted if our interpretation is in any way deficient. For example, if we misunderstand the parameters and conventions of an ancient genre and unconsciously impose our own genre presuppositions, we could end up making demands of the text that are unrealistic. Could it be called an error that the genealogy of Christ omits several generations? That would depend on the parameters of the genre of genealogy. If we believed that freedom from error required every generation to be represented (as might be expected in the understanding and use of genealogies in our modern culture), we would either have to declare the biblical text in error or we would have to engage in harmonizing gymnastics that would stretch all credulity. Of course, neither of these exigencies is necessary when we simply recognize that the conventions of genealogies were different in ancient and classical times. Our doctrinal affirmation is weakened, however, if all we are really saying is "whatever the text means, it is right."

In the final assessment, the categories of "error" and "no error" only address one of many important criteria for making meaningful doctrinal affirmations about how we rely on the faithfulness of Scripture. It is a criterion that has

diminishing usefulness or applicability the further one moves from narrative genres. What is it that is inerrant about a proverb, which is by definition a generalization? What do we mean when we say that a psalm is inerrant? These are prayers from human beings, often confused as they lament the circumstances of their lives, wondering where God is and what he is doing. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1). In what sense do these become the inerrant affirmations of God’s revelation? Where is their authority found? By raising these questions, we are not suggesting that we should consider these genres erroneous; rather we recognize that the classification “inerrant” is not meaningfully applicable to the genre.

If we would say that inerrancy is limited to Scripture’s affirmations, we are left with the recounting of historical events, the existence of the people who participated in those events, propositional statements that are made in the text (“Lord, you have searched me and known me”), and less clearly, that when a prophet says that these are the words he received from God, they are. This leaves a lot of material unaddressed. How is a legal statement inerrant? How is a fable (e.g., Jotham’s in Judg 9) or parable inerrant? How is Deborah’s song inerrant? More importantly, is inerrancy the best way to talk about the authority it has as inspired Scripture? Are we really content to say only that we affirm that Jotham spoke it or that Deborah sang it? What is inerrancy all about?

The strength of the term is that it has helped evangelicals of several generations to articulate their commitment to the veracity of the claims made in Scripture—particularly (though not solely) related to the Old Testament narratives, the Gospels and the Epistles. The limitation of the term is that it doesn’t say enough and that it can distract us from larger statements that must be made. Too many evangelicals would be willing to go to the stake declaring that there truly was a woman named Rahab in a Late Bronze city of Jericho who hung out a scarlet thread when the walls of that city came crashing down, but they harbor deep doubts about the idea that God would mandate the slaughter of all the inhabitants of that city. Inerrancy is of no value if we do not accept as true the revelation of the nature of God in Scripture. If ultimately the Bible is truly God’s revelation of himself, there is no greater truth than the way God is described as being and acting in its pages. Our most significant path to biblical authority is found not as much in the facts that are affirmed and the instruction that is given (though those are important); it is found in how each genre of Scripture reveals God to us, and what that revelation is. Since the Bible *is* revelation, its authority is most vested in that revelation. That revelation is not

focused on cosmic geography, physiology or meteorology; it is not even focused on an ethical system, social issues or behavioral objectives, though it is not without guidance in these. Even most narratives do not intend to give us heroes or role models. God is the hero of the Bible, and it is his story. We cannot allow descriptors like *inerrancy* to distract us from these truths.

Summary Points on Applying Inerrancy

In the next chapter we will propose alternate language and perspectives to move beyond inerrancy to some stronger ways to talk about biblical authority. Here, however, we can conclude by summarizing some of the points that come out of the discussion so far.

Errors of Inerrancy Advocates

- They have at times misunderstood "historical" texts by applying modern genre criteria to ancient literature, thus treating it as having claims that it never intended.
- They have at times treated events, people, composition, science and theology all on the same plane—even though they are not, and each needs to be treated separately.
- They have often misunderstood the nature of literary production in the ancient world.
- They have assumed there were single original autographs that were inerrant, whereas composition may not always have come about through a single autograph.
- They have at times confused locution and illocution. (Inerrancy technically only applies to the latter, though of course, without locutions there can be no illocution.)
- They have often failed to account for Israel's immersion in the cognitive environment of the ancient Near East.
- They have often too easily ignored similarities between the Old Testament and ancient literature.

- They have at times been too anxious to declare sections of the Old Testament to be historical in a modern sense, where it may not be making those claims for itself.
- They have insisted on the application of the term *inerrancy* to genres for which it offers little clarification on the nature of authority.

Even so, it should not be assumed that we are therefore casting in our lot with critical scholarship.

Errors of Skeptical Scholarship

- They have believed they could sort out sources in a manuscript with confidence.
- They are frequently driven by skepticism and doubt.
- They are willing to read against the text or across the text, thus denying its authority.
- They sometimes have no regard for the theology of the text.
- They have generally believed they could assign dates to their sources.
- They are often too quick to disbelieve events and people.
- They have too easily ignored differences between the Old Testament and ancient literature.
- They have often been too eager to dismiss sections of the Old Testament as mythological.
- They have often been too willing to replace the agendas of the text with their own agendas.
- They too often critique the Bible by applying modern standards of historiography and attempting to make the text conform to modern conventions and objectives.
- They too often are dismissive of the idea that God acts in the world.

Categories for application. Finally, in light of all of the above, we can now identify seven categories to which inerrancy has been applied and which need individual investigation.

1. Facts and historical referentiality (people and events). Inerrancy is rightly applied to this category with the caveat that we must be diligent to understand what claims are being made relative to the conventions of the genre in the ancient world and in the Bible. Inerrancy would pertain to narrative representations of people and events insofar as they are affirmed to be real people involved in real events in the real past. Beyond that, conventions would dictate which truths took priority. Rather than talking about "historical" literature, it is more precise to talk about "narrative literature about real events and real people in a real past representing truth by means of its own established and recognized conventions."

2. Composition (authorship, dates of books). In light of what we have proposed regarding "authors" and "books" in the ancient world, we may find that the claims in this area are not what we have thought. Consequently there is little applicability of inerrancy to these questions short of affirmation of the authority figure's involvement and any direct contextual claims made of the authority figure's involvement. Inerrancy would then pertain to the role of the authorities (i.e., the role of Moses or Isaiah as dominant, determinative and principal voice), not to so-called authors writing so-called books—but the literature in its entirety would be considered authoritative.

3. Text in the autographs. The qualification that inerrancy relates to the original autographs may itself need further qualification in light of the likelihood that some of the canonical books did not come down to us through a single autograph. An alternate way of linking the authority of the text to a form that precedes the stage in which we are aware of errors in scribal transmission would be to link the authority to the final canonical form, which was then transmitted as canon. Beyond that it is important to affirm that the locutions have been reliably preserved in the process that led from communication to canon. The term *inerrancy* cannot, however, be applied to this. We should also feel comfortable with the claim that though we are aware of mistakes in transmission and translation, even our modern translations offer us a reliable record of God's Word that can serve us in an authoritative role. Again, however, we would not use *inerrant* to describe any of the manuscripts or our translations.

4. Doctrine. We must absolutely continue in the conviction that Scripture's theological affirmations are inerrant. At the same time, to the extent that doctrinal formulations often require us to move beyond the explicit statements of the text to an interpretation of them, we cannot attach inerrancy to all of our creedal affirmations.

5. Propositions. When Scripture explicitly offers propositional truth, we can easily affirm the inerrancy of those propositions. We must be more cautious, however, if we are inferring propositions from the text through interpretation. We should also resist the temptation to reduce the authority of Scripture to a series of propositions. Biblical authority goes beyond this.

6. Revelation (picture of God). This is at the core of biblical authority. Above all else, when we affirm the Bible is true, we are saying that its picture of God is accurate and that we should embrace it as coming from God himself, not by human invention. Certainly it must also be asserted that if the picture of God is true, this has implications that ripple across some of the other discussion. So, for example, the affirmation of God as the one who powerfully delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt requires one to affirm that they were in Egypt and that the event unfolded as described. If the event did not happen, the profile of God as expressed in that event is nullified.[7] Inerrancy then pertains most importantly to the profile of God, the plight and nature of people, and God's plan for reconciling them to relationship with him.

7. Interpretive conclusions (young earth, eschatological schemes, theories of the atonement, etc.). We must be careful not to confuse our interpretations with the text itself as we discuss inerrancy and authority. We may well believe that certain interpretations are inevitable, though if others arrive at other plausible interpretations, the inevitability is falsified. Positions such as young earth or premillennialism may be defensible interpretations, but they cannot invoke inerrancy as their claim to truth.

For Further Reading

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Proposition 21

Belief in Authority Not Only Involves What the Bible Is *but Also What We* Do *with It*

As we have seen, the concept of inerrancy has served a useful role as evangelicals have tried to articulate a coherent and robust doctrine of Scripture. It continues to serve in that capacity, but as might be expected, its limitations have been exposed as it has been put to the test in a variety of ways. These limitations do not necessitate discarding the term, but perhaps suggest that we should not put as much weight on it as we have and should begin to look for other ways to pick up the slack. We are offering such a proposal here for consideration.

Though the term *inerrancy* describes the nature of Scripture, it was adopted out of desire to affirm how *we* should then *read* Scripture. The logic was that if God is characterized as being faithful and true, then his revelation should be considered faithful and true, and serious readers of the Bible ought to adopt it as God's truth. This makes sense, but as we have found over the decades, working out the details is not easy. Note, however, that the bottom line of inerrancy pertains to how we read the text. Recall that the term initially gained prominence in reaction to how critical scholarship was reading the text (myth, legend, saga, late fabrications, etc.). When evangelicals responded with a statement affirming what the Bible was (inerrant), we were indicating what we had accepted by a combination of faith and theological reasoning. It is no surprise that those who did not share our faith or affirm our theological reasoning saw our claim as an invitation to find errors in the Bible. In this way the battle lines were drawn, but possibly not in the best places. Apologetics became the focus, rather than a statement of our belief or commitment. Our best doctrinal formulation should not be constructed to convince skeptics but to truly describe our actual beliefs.

We are not proposing yet another apologetics-style descriptor of what Scripture is, but a threefold affirmation concerning how we are committed to reading Scripture. This threefold affirmation can conveniently be associated with the three categories of speech act, though they are not bound by that association.

Our proposal is that we should be *competent* readers of the locutions, *ethical* readers as we seek to faithfully follow the illocutions and *virtuous* readers with

regard to the perlocutions.[1]

Competent Readers

We have identified the locutions as the words used in communication, whether spoken or written. The range of locution includes, among other things, grammar, syntax, words used, discourse and genre. Locutions that are intended to take on meaning for the audience must accommodate that audience if communication is to be successful.

Since the locutions sit at the fountainhead of communication we must be careful to get things right here, or the remainder of the interpretive process will be jeopardized. The mechanics of language must be properly understood by those who are competent in both the original source languages and the target languages when translation is involved. If we misunderstand a verb tense, fail to detect a purpose clause, misrepresent the meaning or nuance of a word, or characterize a genre in an anachronistic way, the ripple effects will bring distorted conclusions or, more often, ones that are simply wrong. The history of biblical interpretation is littered with the results of such mistakes. In these cases the errors are *ours*, not the Bible's.

Our interpretations and conclusions about the Bible's teaching always carry the qualification that those conclusions only remain sound if we have read the locutions competently. So, for example, when the gap theory was proposed for Genesis 1 a century ago, it enjoyed a period of popularity until experts in Hebrew grammar pointed out that the theory relied on an indefensible understanding of the syntax of Genesis 1:2. Arguments continue to take place concerning the nuance of the word *yôm* (day)—a mistake here will affect all other aspects of the interpretation.

In some cases, the Bible's inerrancy has been defended or attacked when in reality it was the competence of the reader that was the problem. Skeptics have criticized the inerrancy of Scripture by pointing out that the description of the possession of the land by the Israelites differs between Judges 1 and the book of Joshua. Competent reading of the genres represented in these two texts, however, offers a ready solution to the presumed problem. As another example, evangelical interpreters have often declared that inerrancy demands that in Joshua 10 the heavenly bodies ground to a halt, and these readers have then sought astronomical affirmation of their interpretation. Alternatively, an

understanding of the genre and background of Joshua 10 can show that there is no call to defend such theories and that inerrancy is therefore misapplied. It is no surprise that the critics scoff. We diminish the Bible's authority if we claim the cover of inerrancy for our incompetence or ignorance. The problems are with the reader, not with the text. Whatever means we choose to articulate the trustworthiness of Scripture, we must begin by being competent readers.

Ethical Readers

This is the most significant category when we are discussing inerrancy. Sometimes, as mentioned above, skeptical readers ridicule evangelical interpreters because we have made claims about the Bible that are skewed by our incompetence, but other times skeptical readers are driven by their own chosen models of reading the text. Michael Fox famously said in his commentary on Esther, "The willingness not to take the text at face value is the essence of critical scholarship."[2] Critical scholars, by this definition as well as by their readily observed practice, do not hesitate to read against the grain of the text or across the text. In their hands the biblical text is subjected to modern readings that are dismissive of what the text asserts for itself. Readers with vested interests of all sorts apply their modern lenses to the text to expose in it or extract from it any number of claims: the horrors of patriarchy or slavery, the violence of God, the politicized agendas of the supposed redactors, the communicators' dependence on the literature of their neighbors and endless other variations.

At the same time, some evangelical readers are too often busy making of the text what *they* want it to be. It becomes a compendium of ethics, a guide to the will of God for an individual's life, a handbook for resolving social issues or a Trojan horse containing scientifically sophisticated information in ancient guise. Among its worst manifestations are the attempts to break the "Bible Code" and in so doing to derive hidden information.

The problem in all of these cases is that the reader is not following the path set by the communicators' illocutions to lead to the intended meaning. Our belief about Scripture does not allow latitude for the reader to pick up the simple locution and then choose his or her independent illocution to produce a private meaning. This is unethical reading, and we know it. When a journalist clips a quote from a politician's speech and then gives it a totally different meaning

from what was intended by the politician, we label the journalist unethical. The same constraints apply when we are dealing with the Bible. We must be guided by the human communicator's intention (which we believe he has effectively communicated) because that is where the authority is.

We cannot invoke divine intention to seek a meaning that supersedes the intention of the human communicator. It is true that the ultimate authority derives from God, but we have no way of getting to that divine intention except through the canonical human communicators (either those associated with the canonical books themselves or those within the canon who offer further understandings). It was God's choice to convey his communication through human mediation, not our decision. If God has another meaning that goes beyond what the human communicators in the canon intend, we would need another authoritative voice to give it to us—otherwise it would be just our own invention rather than God's intended meaning. We are therefore inextricably tied to the authority figure's communicated intention and those extensions contained within the canon, and we have a duty as ethical readers to restrict ourselves to that.

This means that if it is the communicator's intention to affirm that he is dealing with real people and real events in a real past, we are duty bound to read the text in that way. If in a future generation interpreters conclude that in that text the communicator was not intending to deal with real people in a real past, no harm done. Our commitment is to whatever can be determined as the intention of the human communicator[3]—that is where the authority is vested by God.

Virtuous Readers

The third descriptive term, *virtuous*, relates to the perlocution part of the speech act. The Bible is offering an encounter with God, and it expects the reader to be transformed as a result. If our doctrine of Scripture does not include this aspect, it is inadequate. It will not suffice to say that we believe that the recorded events really happened if we fail to respond with belief and trust in the God who acted in them. The doctrine of Scripture we proclaim and embrace is meaningless if we neglect the God who is revealed therein or fail to become the people of God. Our virtuous lives are the evidence of the vibrancy of our response to God.

When we speak of the Bible having authority, we indicate that the proper

response is submission. We submit by accepting the picture of God that the Bible presents. When we are installing new software on our computers, we sometimes get prompted to do either a “full install” or a “custom install.” I always do a full install because I am not knowledgeable enough to know which parts I could safely set aside in a custom install. Unfortunately some readers of the Bible, uncomfortable with parts of the presentation of God, opt for a “custom install”—accepting only those parts that appeal to them. The result is that they create their own God, likely in their own image. This is not submission to the authority of Scripture. Of all the aspects of Scripture that might be considered inerrant, the picture of God is at the top of the list.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

Submission and virtuous living are accomplished with the help of the Holy Spirit, and, in fact, each segment of the speech act involves the Holy Spirit, so we must pause to consider the Spirit’s role. The Holy Spirit is involved with the human communicators, with the text and with the reader, but has specific roles in each that need to be carefully identified. Second Peter 1:20-21 affirms that the human communicators were “carried along” by the Holy Spirit. The vagueness of the verb leaves room for a variety of mechanisms,[4] but makes the point that the Holy Spirit is the divine communicator conveying the divine intention to the human whose intentions execute that divine will. The Holy Spirit provides the compelling impetus for the revelation to be conveyed.

The descriptor *inspiration* refers to the Holy Spirit’s role in reference to the text, as specified in 2 Timothy 3:16. This means that the Holy Spirit was instrumental in assuring that what ended up in the text was what God wanted in the text. Consequently, inspiration indicates how we ought to think about the source of the text. Therefore, while the Holy Spirit’s role with the human communicator pertains to the illocution and the meaning of the text, his role in inspiration identifies him as the source of the locutions. The fact that these locutions have a divine source does not give us the freedom to attach our own illocutions or related meanings to the text. We are bound by the Holy Spirit’s role with the human communicator in conjunction with the resulting text. It is appropriate to refer to the text as authoritative, but only in the sense that it is connected to the human communicator’s intentions—it is not independently authoritative. The caveat to this has already been mentioned: any divine

intention that goes beyond the human communicator's intention would have to have verification from another authoritative voice in order to be considered valid.

The third role of the Holy Spirit, and the most complicated and misunderstood, is the role with regard to the reader. We contend that it is essential here to specify that the Holy Spirit's role with the reader is not going to redo or undo the work that was already done in the other areas. Meaning was generated through the human communicators—we should not expect new meaning or even that the Holy Spirit's role is to deliver an understanding of that meaning. No new meanings are privately given for the text (locutions) that has been established. Instead, we should understand that the Holy Spirit's role with the reader pertains to perlocution.

Perlocution is what identifies the expected response to a speech act. If the illocution is a command, the perlocution would be obedience. Perlocution pertains to the successful conclusion of the speech act. The Holy Spirit is largely involved at the perlocutionary level as we are enabled to understand the truthfulness of the text, recognize what it requires from us and then actually take the appropriate steps to actualize the intentions that the Holy Spirit initially delivered to the human instrument. In this way the Holy Spirit convicts and motivates transformation. The Holy Spirit is thus involved in particular ways with each segment of the speech act.

Each of these three terms—*competent*, *ethical* and *virtuous*—tells us what sort of readers we ought to be because of what we believe the text objectively is. This approach moves away from apologetics, for there is nothing to prove—only a response to what we believe. If we agree with one another to be this sort of reader, we will accomplish all of what inerrancy accomplished and more. These terms also give us the flexibility to grow and learn as we continue to understand how God revealed himself through the human communicators.

Truth and Authority

Christian Smith, in a book titled *The Bible Made Impossible*, has criticized how evangelicals have used Scripture, what they believe the Bible to be and how they have applied inerrancy.[5] Though we disagree with many of the points he makes, we believe that he is correct in maintaining that there is indeed a problem. We are misinformed readers when we use the Bible for purposes that exceed its

intents. Remember, the authority of the text is inextricably tied to the illocutions and meanings of the human communicators within the canon. Smith adopts the term *Biblicism* to encompass a wide variety of abuses of the Bible.

We have noted above that the proper response to the Bible is a virtuous life—but that does not mean that the Bible can be considered to provide a solution to every ethical dilemma. We have suggested that the Bible gives us an accurate picture of God, but that does not mean that it contains sufficient information to settle every doctrinal dispute. We believe that the Bible is relevant for us today, but that does not mean that it speaks directly to all the social issues that surround us in contemporary culture. We affirm that God wants us to walk through life as his people carrying out his mission and serving his kingdom, but that does not mean that we should expect the Bible to give us specific guidance about what his will is for the decisions we face in life, large or small.

When we press the Bible into tasks that are not within its purview, we are violating its authority by trying to extract a word from God and presenting our conclusion as God's Word, when in reality he has said no such thing. If we do this, we are not only misguided but also guilty of violating the third commandment—for we take the Lord's name in vain when we claim his authority for something that is only our own idea or conviction.

When we talk about the Bible leading us into truth, we are not claiming that every truth is available through the Bible. When we say that all truth is God's truth, we are not claiming that all truth is in his revelation of himself, but that what he reveals is true. When we talk about the Bible being true, we are not claiming that any interpretation that is characterized by truth can be identified as legitimate interpretation.

One way to draw important lines of demarcation is to recognize the difference between truth and authority. Whatever we identify as coming with the Bible's authority is true. But not everything that is true comes with the Bible's authority. If we view truth and authority as concentric circles, authority should be pictured as a smaller circle fully within the circle of truth (see figure 21.1).

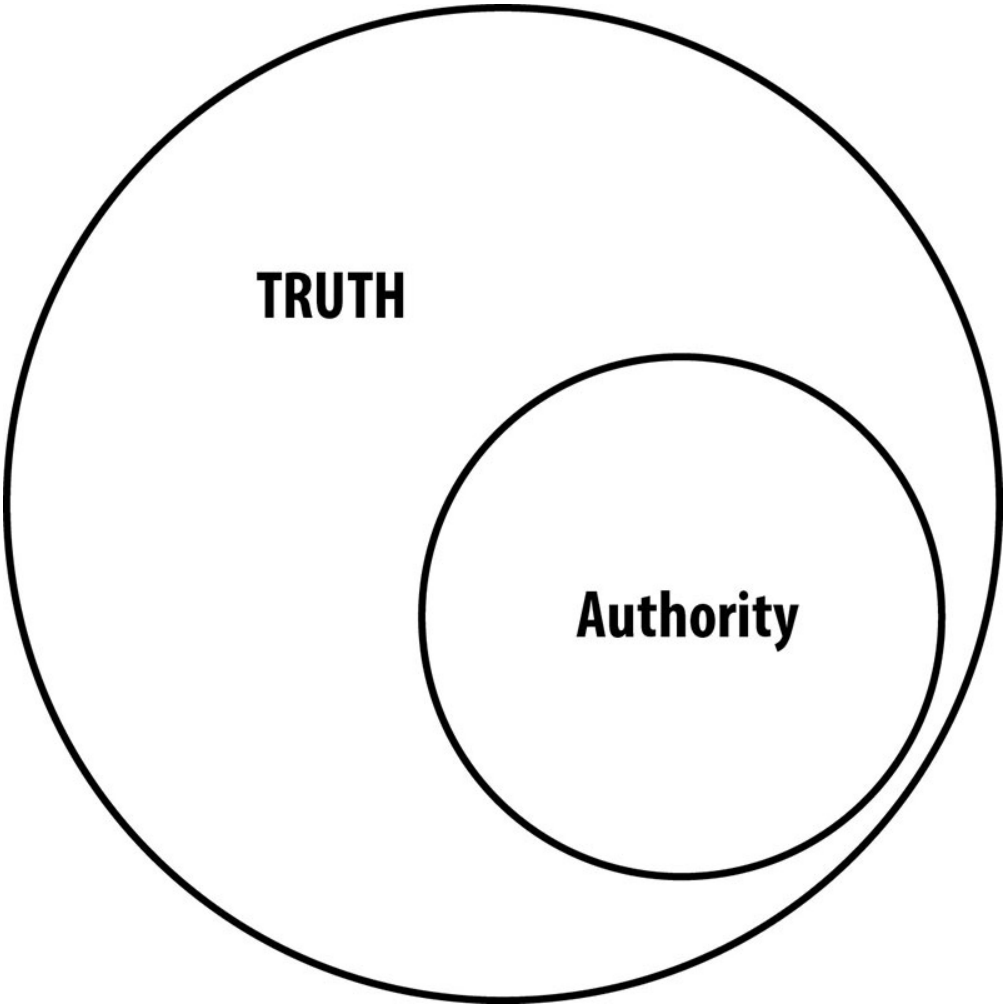


Figure 21.1. Truth and authority

We cannot be content to search Scripture for truth; our search is for that which has authority. It may be true that Esther was courageous and that Nehemiah was a successful leader. But I would contend that the Bible's authority is not teaching that we ought to be courageous or that Nehemiah's principles of leadership are endorsed as the "biblical model." Scripture contains all sorts of incidentals that carry no authority, though they are true. Likewise, when we are interpreting Scripture we may gather insights from a passage that we consider to be true, but that does not mean that the human communicator intended to convey that meaning. If he did not so intend, that insight does not carry authority. Divine communication came through a human communicator and, as we have stated, our only access to that divine communication is through the intended meaning of the human communicators in the canon. If our interpretive insights move outside

of that circle, they may be true, but they do not come with the authority of the text.

Reasoning from this principle, we can now conclude that many of the things we try to do with Scripture deviate from its intent and therefore from its authority. Extracting inferences or incidentals about ethics, God's will for our lives, doctrinal controversies or social issues may lead us to conclusions that we could consider generally biblical, but to label them as "authoritative" requires a higher standard and more stringent criteria in our methodology. We cannot bring biblical authority in general or inerrancy in particular to support any conclusions that we draw that cannot be substantiated as part of the intention of an authorized human communicator, or we will be guilty of claiming that same authority for ourselves.

Our interpretations that seek to represent the authoritative message of the Bible reliably must therefore be substantiated by evidence within the text. It would even be questionable to extend the teaching of one text into another if the human communicator in the second was not intending that meaning. For example, authority would be violated if we simply said, "We know from a variety of Scriptures that God affirms the sanctity of marriage; therefore we can interpret Song of Songs as being about the sanctity of marriage." Although we will not accept that one part of Scripture contradicts another part, we cannot read the meaning of one text into another where it was not in the intended meaning. The latter strategy undermines the authority of the text. A canonical perspective can augment the original human communicator's meaning, but it cannot override the authority vested in that human communicator.

Faithful Conclusions for Virtuous Readers

Throughout this book we have attempted to bring the emerging information about literary production in the ancient world into discussion with biblical authority and, particularly, with inerrancy. What we are learning about ancient literary culture necessarily has an effect on how we formulate a doctrine of authority. While previous formulations were well-intentioned and helpful, they did not have the advantage of the growing body of evidence from the ancient world.

Our commitment has been to chart a course through the crucial insights gleaned from ancient literary culture toward a reformulation of biblical authority, and by so doing to strengthen the doctrinal understanding and commitment of evangelicals. In the process we have identified a number of elements that have been traditionally associated with biblical authority that can be seen as inconsistent with the emerging profile of literary production. In some cases conclusions that had been previously considered unacceptable may now be seen as less controversial and more easily integrated into a staunchly evangelical formulation of inerrancy and, more broadly, biblical authority. In other cases, some conclusions that we had held can now be seen as based on anachronistic ideas or on unfounded perceptions about the ancient world.

In conclusion, then, we would like to offer a briefly annotated list of what we propose is safe to believe within a robust doctrine of biblical authority. But if there are things safe to believe, then there are things not safe to believe. So we will also list a number of items that we consider inimical to biblical authority. Last we will raise questions that we are still pondering. We certainly don't want to claim too much in these conclusions or think more highly of what we have accomplished than we ought. We want to be virtuous readers, and we want our conclusions to be faithful. We will be pleased if these concluding thoughts become talking points and encouragement for further research and reflection.

Before proceeding, however, we would like to make an important observation. We realize it's always tempting for readers to jump to the last chapter of a book and find out how the story ends. But there are risks in doing

so, especially on a topic like biblical authority. Many evangelicals have developed strongly held views and practically dare anyone to challenge those views. If that is the case, then introducing new evidence and insights into the discussion can be as unwelcome as an oncologist's report.

So if you are reading these conclusions before considering the evidence presented throughout this book, then understand that disbelief, if not knee-jerk reactions, may be almost unavoidable. Conversely, if you follow the path that we have taken through the evidence, we think you'll find that our ideas and conclusions are worthy of consideration and discussion.

Safe to Believe

It is safe to believe that the way God communicated to humans is more complex than we have been accustomed to think. In the past we too easily thought in modern terms about an author sitting down and writing a manuscript, which is then published as a book. (As authors we only wish it were that simple!) When thinking about how the Bible was written, many Christians modified the simplistic notion of authorship only slightly to include God's Spirit revealing the specific words that an author wrote. But this model is foreign to the ancient world (and in reality, to the majority of book production in the modern Western world); it should not serve as the premise for a formulation of biblical authority. The process was much richer and more sophisticated. The extent to which God entrusted significant aspects of his revelation of divine truth to the care of humans is a blessing; he believes in us and takes pleasure in working in and through us. Paradoxically, Jesus said that we would do even greater works than he himself did (Jn 14:12).

It is safe to believe that the Old Testament and New Testament were located firmly in the cognitive environment of the ancient world. That Israelites thought and lived similarly to people around them, and that the early Christians did as well, is patently obvious in the text and logically mandated. But we can also affirm that it does not pose a theological problem to admit this, even though aspects of that ancient cognitive environment are increasingly being recognized as counterintuitive to modern Western thinking. In the past, reticence to accept this premise was based in part on the belief that Scripture needs to be unique. Some felt that if biblical literature was seen as similar to that of the ancient world it would therefore be classified as commonplace—another parochial

literature from the distant past with myths and political agendas. Fortunately, that conclusion is not the necessary result of seeing the literature of the Bible as anchored in its world. Rather, God was using that which was familiar to communicate himself and his nature. This makes the Bible effective communication, not tainted derivative literature.

Some have also maintained that if the Bible is to be viewed as revelation then its information must be new. This needs to be qualified. We expect something about it to be new, but *every* aspect does not have to be new. God did not invent a new language to give his revelation, nor did he create a new culture unrelated to anything else. To maintain that the Bible is God's revelation does not require us to believe that everything in it is new. Our doctrine of Scripture is well-served to understand that God gave some new information, but often a new perspective on what was common in the ancient world. The concept of divine revelation is not jeopardized by the idea that the revelation and the recipients of that revelation were rooted in the ancient world.

It is safe to believe that God revealed truth orally. Affirmations of the Bible's authority focus on the divine voice as the source of revelation. The Old Testament frequently records God speaking to Moses, the prophets and others. Jesus and Paul said that they preached the words of God. The book of Hebrews underscores God speaking through the prophets and his Son. Even though texts were oral, since God was the source they were fully authoritative. Strictly speaking, Scripture does not state that God inspired the act of recording his truth in writing (but see Rev 1:19; 2:1; 14:13; 21:5). Paul, looking back on the Old Testament, affirmed that the written text was inspired, but that's different from saying God inspired specifically and only as authors wrote. The point is, written forms were inspired because oral texts were authoritative and because written texts reliably represented the truths stated in oral texts. Perhaps God was not guiding the pen of the authors as they wrote to any greater extent than he was guiding the lips of the speakers as they spoke.

We are not suggesting that the term *inspiration* should apply broadly to inspired persons or to an inspired process, only that oral texts were the initial stage of revelation. Written texts were acknowledged as inspired, but not because putting something in writing made it better. For at least first-century Christians, it's likely that written texts were initially perceived to be another stage in the process of transmission of authoritative truth, not a final, once-and-for-all authorized culmination of oral stages. (Oral texts continued to be preferred into the second century.) We acknowledge that eventually there was

such a culmination in written form, but when and how that development occurred is beyond the scope of this book.

We do not think what we're saying here removes any of the authority of the Bible or takes anything away from its inspiration. But it does offer a more accurate explanation of how God chose to reveal himself.

It is safe to believe that Scripture is verbally inspired. We affirm that Scripture is the product of verbal inspiration. God spoke words, not simply ideas. Though ideas were inherent in revelation, to the extent that human words could communicate divine thoughts those ideas were expressed in the categories and terminology of the Hebrews and Greeks. Faith communities validated the words received, and it is those validated words that we affirm as inspired.

Divine truth was revealed in speech and action. The source was God, not humans; they could not have come up with this on their own. Jesus himself was and is the quintessence of divine revelation, the personification of the Father's communication in human form. Paradoxically, God empowered humans as vital participants in his revelation of truth. The rest of humanity is dependent on those participants being faithful hearers, faithful communicators, faithful preservers and faithful scribes. And to this day most of humanity is also dependent on faithful translators, interpreters, teachers and preachers.

Further, Scripture is the product of plenary inspiration. God is the source of all of Scripture. Because God breathed it in its entirety, he is the source even for variant wordings—whether those between Psalm 18 and 2 Samuel 22, between the long and short forms of Jeremiah, or among the Gospels.

It is safe to believe that God empowered faithful followers to pass along oral texts of divine truth. God spoke oral texts, entrusted them to faithful followers and commissioned the followers to pass them on to others. Whether with Old Testament prophets preaching what God had spoken to them, or Jesus' disciples proclaiming what Jesus had taught, oral transmission was the initial means of God's servants communicating the truth to others. Since God did not specify otherwise, followers adhered to the customs of their literary and scribal culture as they transmitted God's revelation. Oral means of transmission were apparently entirely adequate, as were written means, and as are printed means, but none of the three has proven to be perfect. Even the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments engraved on them by God's finger were not preserved.

It is safe to believe that inspired truth was communicated and preserved without the necessity of exact wording. For many reasons, the words we find in modern versions of the Bible do not match word for word what was spoken by

people in the Bible. Speeches, for example, were reconstructed after the fact. Regarding the New Testament, Jesus spoke in Aramaic. Yet it's safe to believe that the true essence of his words was remembered and passed on in Christian communities over several decades. At various points what Jesus said in Aramaic was translated into Greek (but with a couple of exceptions; see Mk 15:34). Eventually scribes/Evangelists recorded the words on manuscripts, which would become the Gospels.

But variants among the Gospels testify to different traditions about specific details and specific wording of things Jesus said and did. Further, when scribes made copies of the written manuscripts of books of the New Testament in order that more communities would have access to them, the evidence suggests that they did not make exact duplicates. Eventually the Bible was translated into modern languages. Yet through all the twists and turns of the process of transmission, reliable and truthful representations of what Jesus said and did were preserved. The Gospels demonstrate that the same truths could be transmitted even with slight variation. In the same manner, the manuscripts faithfully transmitted the truth even with slight variation. It's essential to note that variants among the Gospels and in manuscripts take nothing away from the authority of the biblical text.

It is safe to believe that God often works through processes that we would label "natural," and that therefore when a "natural" explanation can be offered God is not thereby excluded. In the ancient world every effect had a divine cause. There was no such category as "natural." Some today may believe that when science identifies a natural cause-and-effect process God can therefore be eliminated. But science can neither prove nor disprove God's involvement. Science is not currently constructed to penetrate the metaphysical realm. Consequently, science is not a threat to theological affirmations or beliefs about God working in the world (past or present). Another way to say this is that we need not believe that every act of God in this world should be considered intervention or miracle. God certainly can act and did act in ways that defy natural laws. But he often chooses to work through those natural laws. In fact, natural laws should be so defined only because they are consistent and regular, not because they happen apart from God. Thus, inspiration could be more supernatural in some cases and more natural in others, though the end result is the same. Moses, for example, received divine revelation in very supernatural ways. Paul's letters, on the other hand, can be explained more naturally, by which we mean that he was freely expressing his thoughts, while divine

superintendence was ensuring that he was simultaneously expressing God's truth in human words. This may be referred to as concursive inspiration.

It is safe to believe that the Holy Spirit superintended the process of preserving divine truth. The natural human processes of transmitting truth were not left to the whim and will of imperfect or unorthodox agents. The sending forth of God's truth was under God's guiding hand. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would lead true followers into the truth, and we accept the fact that he did. We acknowledge, however, that believing in this ministry of the Holy Spirit is an exercise of faith. It would be impossible to prove scientifically. But similar to Christ's promise to build his church regardless of the odds against it, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide faithful followers into the truth in spite of human imperfections.

It is safe to believe that once divine revelation was inscribed in writing, written versions did not supersede oral versions. In a hearing-dominant society both oral and written texts could be authoritative insofar as they were faithfully transmitted. People who only had access to oral texts were not considered to be at a disadvantage; conversely, the few people in the ancient world who had easy access to written texts were not considered to be at an advantage. This is baldly counterintuitive for those of us who assume that there are significant advantages to printed forms of the Bible. But in ancient culture, truth simply did not need to be recorded in written form to have the intended effect and to be authoritative.

It is safe to believe that the authority behind a book is more important than identifying someone as the sole or direct author. In regard to the Old Testament, it has long been believed that the concept of authorship provided a foundation by which to affirm that the prophets were responsible for the material in the canonical books that are associated with them (see also Moses). But in ancient literary culture a written work was not necessarily thought of in authoritative terms. Given what we have been discovering about the hearing-dominant nature of ancient society and the fact that the concepts of "authors" and "books" were largely unknown, or at least less significant, we can reformulate our commitment in terms of the claims that are actually being made: that the communication by certain authority figures is reliably represented in the canonical books associated with them. Biblical authority was associated first with the authority figure that generated the communication (when such was the case), and then finally with the community or communities that canonized the Old Testament who eventually recognized the authority of the composite literary work. Reference to these authority figures inside a book or subsequent books of the Bible was not

intended to identify them as authors, and therefore our formulation of biblical authority need not be based on that premise.

In regard to the New Testament, because the oral texts were the words of God—either from the lips of Jesus or from faithful followers who spoke for God—they were recognized as authoritative. Though the transition to written texts is not addressed in the New Testament, we can infer that the Christian communities would have recognized written forms to have equal authority.

It is safe to believe that the existence of an autograph is not always realistic or necessary. Once we realize that the concepts of authors and books are easily encumbered with anachronism, we will find that the idea of "autographs" decreases in significance. If divine revelation was given first in oral form, and if that revelation was passed on orally, and if written forms of the revelation were archived in documents and later combined into literary works by various people, then an autograph is a moot point. Whether various canonical books did or did not have autographs becomes an academic discussion, not a theological one, if the concept of autographs is not tied to authority.

It is safe to believe that some later material could be added and later editors could have a role in the compositional history of a canonical book. In the past, the activity of editors or scribes inserting additional material into texts in the process of composition was considered problematic, because such activity could not be connected to the authority figure (formerly considered the author) and brought deviation from the concept of autographs. In other words, any substantive activity by interlocutors (scribes or editors) would undermine the possibility of a text's authority. But if the information offered throughout this book is accepted, then the canonical book is not making the claims that we thought, and the claims it *is* making are not undermined by the possibility of such interlocutors. As oral texts were transmitted from one generation to another, the wording and details varied within a degree of variation accepted by the communities passing along the texts. In regard to the Old Testament, translators and scribes transmitted texts with embedded variants. Nevertheless, these oral and written texts were accepted as authoritative, as is demonstrated by Jesus and authors of the New Testament quoting from them. Authority then existed in the interlaced combination of the initial authority figure or tradition and the assessments of the canonizing community which accepted the communication as from God.

Likewise, when Paul asserted in 2 Timothy 3:16 that Scripture (*graphē*) was inspired, he focused attention on the written texts that had been passed down into

the first century. With the variety of variants that had accrued in the transmission of the texts across the centuries, the texts could still be accepted as inspired. The concept of authority therefore encompassed all parties and steps that led to the received texts referred to by Paul.

Authority applies to the reliable representation of the communicators' intentions at every stage of the process. Whether we refer to editors that had long been recognized (those putting together the sources of Chronicles or anthologizing the Psalms) or those that subsequently may have become involved in the composition of documents and oral traditions into texts, the authority resident in the written product, which was on its way to becoming canonical, extends to their work. Authority is located initially in an authority figure or an authoritative tradition, and ultimately in the canonical product, and therefore is extended by the faith community to all the steps in between. It is initiated and grounded in God the Holy Spirit and carried through to completion by the Holy Spirit. Again, then, the insertion of additional material becomes merely an academic discussion, not a theological one that affects our understanding of authority.

It is safe to believe that there could be duplicate texts with variation. It is interesting that evangelicals have had little problem with variants among certain kinds of texts. Regarding the Old Testament, there are psalms that are largely duplicates yet say different things (e.g., 2 Sam 22 and Ps 18; Ps 14 and Ps 53). It should not be any more problematic if laws duplicate situations yet go different directions since the canonical illocution is not legislative. Likewise duplicate narratives with differing details should not be considered contradictory, with one of them considered wrong. Kings and Chronicles each have their own conventions and have used data in line with those conventions. They may have shaped their locutions differently (within the range of acceptable use of conventions) as the editors chose what truth to highlight to achieve their illocutionary objectives.

In the past some have considered duplicates problematic because one could not obey two laws that gave differing instructions, nor could two narratives with differing details both be accepted because one of them could not be considered inerrant. In our proposal, the differences have to be considered in light of conventions, perspective, flexibility in literary genre and intended illocutions.

Regarding the New Testament, the Gospels were never intended to be duplicate texts per se, but they do provide accounts of the same events, often from differing perspectives, with different wording, and sometimes with

different details. For some Christians it is necessary to find ways to harmonize the differences so that from modern Western historical standards the differences disappear. But that is ethnocentric—or more accurately, culture-centric. There are good explanations for how the differences came about as oral texts were transmitted and written texts took form, and in the minds of the Evangelists the differences did not falsify the truthfulness of their texts. (We could add to this discussion the three accounts of Paul's conversion within the book of Acts that have differing details, which is all the more remarkable if Luke was the author of the entire book.)

It is safe to believe that Old World Science permeates the Old Testament. As explored in proposition 4, reference to the material world and cosmic geography always reflects what was known in the ancient world. God's revelation does not contain any information in those areas that would be a surprise to Israel or that would differentiate their thinking from the rest of the ancient world. In the past some have felt that if the Bible offered a picture of the material world that is now considered patently false (e.g., flat earth, geocentric cosmos, waters above), its authority would be in jeopardy. In fact that is not problematic once we recognize that Old World Science is simply part of the locution and as such is not vested with authority. That is, in the illocutionary intentions of the communication, God was not revealing cosmic geography, physiology or meteorology. Our doctrine is bound to that which the text affirms—that is, we travel the path of the illocution, not every detail of the locutions that serve as the framework of effective communication in context.

It is safe to believe that the inspiration of written texts of the New Testament is an inference based on the inspiration of the Old Testament. The revelatory deposit of truth in the Old Testament, which was accepted as authoritative by Jesus and the apostles and affirmed by Paul and Peter as inspired, likely became a precedent for the New Testament. The words and actions of Jesus were accorded equal authority as the written forms of the Old Testament. And Jesus passed along his authority to his followers, promising that the Holy Spirit would guide them to the truth and speak through them, apparently granting them the same authority that he had. Since the Old Testament was first oral texts, and subsequent to the oral texts long-established written forms became recognized as inspired, we may rightly infer that written texts of the New Testament would in due time be recognized as inspired. It's not unexpected that part of God's plan for communicating to humans would entail empowering us to think, speak and act on his behalf. Whether the Trinity or the canon or the inspiration of the New

Testament, cautious inferences and careful theological induction is essential to the Christian faith.

It is safe to believe that conventions for reporting events in the Bible differ from our contemporary conventions of history writing. We have to understand the narratives of the Bible as literature before we can glean them for history. A narrative has a beginning, a middle and an end; history does not. Anyone narrating events must choose which details to include and which to omit. The narrator must also choose a perspective on the event and will inevitably choose one that suits his or her purposes. Such choices shape the narrative, and someone observing from the outside could always criticize the narrator's choices. Omission should not be mistaken for error (e.g., the Bathsheba incident being absent from Chronicles). Our doctrine of authority cannot be constructed by evaluating the narrative literature according to our modern conventions. The authority is vested in the narrator, and we validate by faith his perspectives and selection. Again we find safety in attending to illocution rather than focusing too much on locution. This is truth-telling literature, and we need to discern the truth the narrator is telling even though his methods and conventions may differ from our own.

It is safe to believe that the Bible can use numbers rhetorically within the range of the conventions of the ancient world. This is a corollary of the last point. We have fairly specific rules about how numerical values are used and what they convey in modern parlance. We cannot assume that every culture shares those same conventions. It is therefore difficult for us to claim that numbers in ancient texts are false or inaccurate. We may conclude that they are exaggerated or even that contradictory amounts are given in sources that report the same event. These may well be inaccuracies or contradictions according to *our* conventions, but that doesn't mean that they jeopardize inerrancy. Again, a numerical quantity is a locution. Authority ties to the illocution and what the narrator is *doing* with those numbers. Whatever he is doing, he is doing within the accepted conventions of their world. Anthropological examples readily confirm that numbers can often have rhetorical value rather than serving as simply quantifications.

It is safe to believe that Old Testament prophecy and New Testament identifications of fulfillment do not need to align. In the past, some have believed that if a New Testament author identified a fulfillment, particularly with reference to Christ, and it appeared to have nothing to do with what the Old Testament prophet was saying, then we would be faced with error. This ceases to

be a problem when we recognize that the New Testament communicators were not trying to express the illocution of the Old Testament prophet. As suggested in proposition 16, the Old Testament prophet had his own illocution that was understood by his audience and that carried authority. The New Testament uses the *locution* of the prophet but offers a new illocution (identification of fulfillment). Both illocutions have authority, but they are not being offered as the same illocutions. We can accept their authority without having the obligation to reconcile them.

Not Safe to Believe

It is not safe to believe that the Bible is just like any other book. Though the literary composition of the books of the Bible may not have differed from that of other documents and literature of the ancient and classical world, the value-added ingredient is God's self-revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit. The distinguishing quality unequaled by any other literature is that the Bible is divine truth. Acknowledgment of familiar language, genres, cultural setting, literary growth and transmission does not undermine the unique status of the Bible as God's authoritative revelation.

It is not safe to believe that inerrancy is falsified by the orality of Scripture. Actually, this statement may be true or false depending on how inerrancy is defined. The point of this book is not to deconstruct inerrancy but to put it on surer footing by carefully accounting for the worldview of the biblical world, which is different from the worldview of modern Western culture. If Christians conceive of inerrancy from the vantage point of print culture and expect sacrosanct wording for the transmission of truth, then they may rightly conclude that understanding orality threatens inerrancy. The alternative is to recognize that inerrancy needs to be redefined in light of the literary culture of the Bible. Hopefully this book is a step in the right direction.

It is not safe to believe that the Old Testament is derivative mythology combed from the ancient world. It is self-evident that the Israelites shared the general cognitive environment of the ancient world, and it is likely that they were aware of many of the traditions from the ancient world (though direct evidence for the latter is sparse). These two givens do not lead to the conclusion that the Israelites were borrowing from the literature of the ancient world and adapting it to their needs. Furthermore, whatever overlap there may have been

between Israelite traditions and those known from the ancient world occurred primarily at the level of locution. Similarities tend to pertain to the cognitive environment in general rather than to specific pieces of literature. At the illocutionary level we may say that traditions in the early chapters of Genesis, for example, served the Israelites by offering an account of God and his ways and conveying their deepest beliefs about how the world works, who they are and how it all began. These are the same questions addressed by the mythological traditions of the ancient world, but the answers given are very different.

It is not safe to believe that everything we find in the Bible can be explained in natural terms. All cause and effect in the perspective of the ancient world is ultimately personal (God or humans). As a result, the Bible does not hesitate to identify divine activity behind unusual or significant occurrences, and we should not doubt God's involvement. At the same time, acknowledging the role of God does not mean that no human involvement can be identified. A natural explanation also does not rule out God's role because he is involved in everything that takes place—whether the results are commonplace with unusual timing or highly unusual, defying ready explanation. Though there are consistencies in the world that God created and his work is usually characterized by those consistencies, he is free to work in other ways. Nevertheless, a biblical claim that something is an act of God does not always or necessarily mean that a human role cannot be investigated or proposed. Neither inerrancy nor authority requires that an act attributed to God be understood as having no possible natural explanation.

It is not safe to believe that people and events portrayed in narrative about the real past are fictional or literary constructs. The significant issue here concerns what the biblical communicator intended in his illocutionary path. Are David and Goliath presented as real people in a real past engaged in a real event? Are Esther and Mordecai? Abraham and Joseph? Noah and Nimrod? Cain and Abel? Adam and Eve? What about Jonah and Job? Joseph and Mary? Ananias and Sapphira? Our decisions must be driven by our best assessments of what the biblical narrator intended. We are no longer working within the purview of biblical authority if we dismiss illocutions of the narrator pertaining to the reality of people and events. All of the above are arguably presented as real people in a real past, and authority is preserved by affirming that. We may still find reason to discuss whether the author of Job intends every part of the book to represent real events in a real past or whether it is literature built around a historical core. The

point is that any conclusion that seeks to maintain authority will conform to the demonstrable intentions of the narrator. When we choose to read against the illocutions of the text we depart from the prerequisites of authority.

We would also include in this category claims that biblical narratives are simply propaganda devised by those seeking to justify their own status. Even while we need to be sensitive to genre, ethical reading with the text does not give us the option of dismissing some events as deviously manufactured for political ends. It is appropriate to recognize that some narratives are pro-(Davidic) monarchy while others might be anti-(Davidic) monarchy in their perspectives. But once we grant the text authority we adopt the position that those perspectives are legitimated by divinely inspired prophetic voice and are not therefore reduced to political posturing. David was far from perfect, and it is therefore possible that some of his tactics remind us of corrupt warlords (1 Sam 25) and may have suffered from tainted motives. But when the text affirms God's approval or God's work in support of David, we no longer have the option of identifying that as a tendentious claim made by someone trying to legitimize David's reign.[1]

It is not safe to believe that biblical books have used pseudepigraphy, forgery or false attribution. Throughout this book we have differentiated between authority figures who serve as the fountainheads of documents that eventually become part of literary works, and a more modern concept of authors. In light of this we must be careful to discern precisely what claim is being made when literature is attributed to a specific person. For example, if the sixth-century Daniel was the authority figure who gave oracles that were duly recorded in documents that were saved until the second century, when someone compiled them into the book we have now and perhaps even included some updated or more specific information (provided by recognized authority figures in that time), that would not constitute pseudepigraphy or false attribution.[2] If that sort of process was an accepted norm, the attribution claims are not as specific and comprehensive as we may have thought when we were using more modern models of literary production. Authority is not jeopardized as long as we affirm the claims that the text is actually making using models of understanding that reflect the ancient world. The conclusions that we draw are not then driven by skepticism, but by realistic models.

It remains dubious whether attribution could legitimately be made to a renowned figure who in fact had no role in producing the literature. It is true that such literature exists (e.g., the books of Enoch or the *Gospel of Thomas*), but

there is little evidence that this would have been acceptable in literature adopted as authoritative. After all, the authority derives from the authority figure. If the original audiences recognized the claims as false (even if transparently so and therefore not necessarily fraudulent), there would be no basis for authority.

Safe to Ask

It is safe to ask whether our doctrine of the authority of Scripture has become too enmeshed in apologetics. Our view of inspiration is not made up of what we can prove, so should apologetic issues dominate our theological formulation? Much of what we believe about the Bible cannot be proven even to ourselves, let alone to skeptics. Furthermore, if we tie apologetics and theology too tightly together, the result could be that we end up trying to defend as theology what are really just apologetic claims that we have made. Then we could end up defending claims that have never been made by the text itself. It is true that at times critics have been negligent to pursue paths of harmonization that could resolve the problems they raise to undermine the Bible, but at the same time evangelicals doing apologetics may sometimes try too hard to harmonize that which is unnecessary to harmonize.

It is safe to ask whether some formulations of biblical inerrancy are faithful to biblical revelation itself in the historic understandings of the church. For many evangelicals, inerrancy may be tied too closely to exact words in written forms of revelation, to original autographs and to standards of accuracy based on modern historiography. But the evidence does not support such entailments. In contrast, if inerrancy is an affirmation that Scripture is always true and never errant, then we are confident in the validity of that conclusion. Might what some people understand by the term *inerrancy* be considered a postbiblical theological construct? Though the term *inerrancy* appears nowhere in Scripture, and though Scripture does not speak explicitly to the issue, it is true that theology sometimes must go beyond explicit statements in Scripture. Nevertheless, we insist that our doctrines must be rooted in the evidence of Scripture itself. So we affirm biblical inerrancy properly understood.

It is safe to ask whether doctrinal discussions regarding the authority of Scripture should focus exclusively on written texts. Although confidence in the authority of the Bible has often been linked to written text, and although one of the tenets of the Reformation was *sola Scriptura*, we wonder whether tying

authority strictly to written texts is rooted in print culture and misrepresents the evidence from Scripture. It is true that we only have the oral communications because they were preserved in written form, but it is possible to work backward from the written forms and reconstruct some features of the oral forms. In the oral culture of the Bible, written texts were not understood to be more precise or more fixed or more permanent expressions of oral texts. The sermons of Jesus, Paul and others, though only oral, were fully authoritative. Though we ask this question, our goal in this book is not to develop a full theology of inspiration. We will leave that to those who specialize in theology. But we are eager to work alongside theologians in constructing a doctrine of Scripture that is carefully rooted in the oral and written texts of Scripture.

It is safe to ask about variants because they do not necessarily constitute errors as understood in the cultural context of the original communication. It is undeniable that there are differences in Scripture, such as among the Gospels, and they may appear to some readers to be errors of fact. It's not only skeptics who see those differences and conclude that the Bible is not inerrant; faithful Christians find the variations disturbing too. What many people fail to recognize is that the issue is tied in with what standards are being used to evaluate the differences. By way of analogy, we know that we cannot use the rules of American football to play the game of football better known in the rest of the world; the result would be misunderstanding and mayhem. Nor can we use modern standards of what constitutes plagiarism to evaluate ancient practices of using sources; we could end up accusing biblical authors of plagiarism. We simply have to adapt how we're thinking to the culture we're evaluating.

To say there are errors in the Bible is to read Scripture against the grain of orality and against the grain of varying genres with various forms of communication. It is a supposition of textual culture fostered by the Enlightenment. The fact is, slight differences in details were not considered errors within the oral culture of the Bible. They were simply discontinuities resulting from the transmission of oral texts, or from the freedom of authors in choosing what or how to write about certain events, or from scribes' alterations as they copied texts.

Yet if we think about those discontinuities in light of modern, print culture, they look like they should count as errors. In that sense inerrancy can appear to be a misnomer. As stated in article 13 of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, "We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose." In other words,

inerrancy may be a valid description of the truthfulness of Scripture when it is clear that the criteria of truthfulness are ancient, not modern. A statement of inerrancy without this qualification as the starting point can make evangelicals appear foolish, and worse, it can hurt our cause rather than help it. Seen through modern Western lenses the Bible may appear to have errors, and when communities of believers proclaim it doesn't and is inerrant, their own statements can appear to be errant, as long as hearers assume that Christians are applying modern standards of truth and error. Further, when Christian young people go on for higher education and discover data in Scripture that challenges common understandings of inerrancy, they are caught in a bind. So when we use the word *inerrancy*, it's essential to clarify whether our criteria are from ancient or modern standards.

It is safe to ask how the body of Christ would best be served by our formulations of biblical authority. As biblical scholars and theologians we need to consider how people understand the language we use to affirm biblical authority. Ill-formed versions of inerrancy have misled many people into false understandings of the nature of Scripture, which has led to poor hermeneutics for interpreting Scripture and to misunderstandings of Bible translations. Even more serious, certain views of inerrancy have led people away from the Christian faith. Such views can also keep people from considering more important matters in Scripture. If there is a stumbling block to people coming to faith, should it not be Christ alone rather than a wall that we inadvertently place in the way of spiritual pilgrimages?

On the other hand, a full appreciation of biblical authority is indispensable for the body of Christ. If the Bible is not recognized to be eternal revelation providing essential information for life and ethical mandates for relationships, it will be impossible for God's revelation to effect his divine purposes. Could there be a more important starting point for life than the recognition that Scripture is the authoritative Word of God?

It is safe to ask what constitutes a robust evangelical doctrine of biblical authority. If it were possible, we would conclude this book with a single paragraph defining a biblical worldview of authority. But we can't. The subject is too complex. It would be reductionist to narrow it down to a few sentences. It would require dialogue with many people, and much time for ideas to mature. But we would like to propose what we consider the most important starting points for a robust belief in biblical authority.

- We believe that a high view of Scripture is essential for the community of

believers, and we must not allow that to be eroded.

- At the same time, we dare not think that longstanding expressions of biblical authority had the advantage of all the evidence and are inviolable statements; we are all involved in an ongoing exercise to consider new evidence and insights and to refine theology and biblical hermeneutics accordingly.
- We consider God's empowerment of humans to be a remarkable testimony to how God acts in this world, especially when the accomplishment of much of his divine purposes depends on frail humans. We conclude that under God's superintendence and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, faithful believers accurately preserved and transmitted the truths that were divinely revealed, even if we cannot know what the exact words were as originally given. (This has been a longstanding conclusion regarding things Jesus said, as evident in the distinction between *ipsissima verba* and *ipsissima vox*.)
- We contend that viewing the inspiration of Scripture solely from the cognitive environment of print culture opens the door to misunderstanding. Only when we enter into the oral culture of the biblical world can we properly understand the nature of biblical revelation.
- We do not believe that it will be possible in this life to comprehend completely biblical inspiration and all it entails nor to come up with language to describe it fully. We are confident that ways we have attempted to move toward a reformulation are deficient; in good faith we have done our best. Hopefully, you will join us in the continuing search for a biblical worldview of authority and pick up where we have left off.

Soli Deo Gloria.

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Notes

Introduction

1David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation* (Nashville: B & H, 1995), p. 64.

2We agree with Allert "that a high view of Scripture demands an understanding and integration of the Bible's very formation"; Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 13.

3Cited in Moisés Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues*, vol. 1 of *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan, 1987), p. 45.

4International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (Chicago: 1978), available at http://65.175.91.69/Reformation_net/COR_Docs/01_Inerrancy_Christian_Worldview.pdf.

Proposition 1

1In fact, the level of general literacy seems to fluctuate. Evidence suggests that general literacy was higher in the Old Babylonian period than in the Neo-Assyrian period more than a millennium later. See summary discussion in Niek Veldhuis, "Levels of Literacy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 68-89.

2William Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 13.

3Ibid., p. 114.

4Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Plato I*, trans. Harold N. Fowler, LCL 36 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), pp. 565-67.

5Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, pp. 26-27.

6Ibid., p. 35. This is not to suggest that they were never read but is a statement of why the documents were written.

7Ibid., p. 13.

8Personal libraries were nearly nonexistent.

9 David Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 6.

10Dominique Charpin, *Reading and Writing in Babylon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 192-93. Schwemer similarly notes that a large proportion of the texts in the library pertained to protecting the king's person; Daniel Schwemer, "Magic Rituals: Conceptualization and Performance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. K. Radner and E. Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 432.

11 At Tell Tayinat a copy of Esarhaddon's vassal treaty was found in the temple across from the altar, suggesting that it was displayed in the god's presence and perhaps served as a votive object. See Jacob Lauinger, "Some Preliminary Thoughts on the Tablet Collection in Building XVI from Tell Tayinat," *The Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 6 (2011): 5-14.

12 For elaboration and details see Richard Hess, "Literacy in Iron Age Israel," in *Windows into Old Testament History*, ed. V. Philips Long, David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 82-102.

13 Schniedewind makes a case that the roots of greater literacy are evident as early as the seventh century B.C.; *How the Bible Became a Book*, p. 2. Undoubtedly, however, it was an extended process that continued even through the Hellenistic period and into the New Testament era.

14 Specifically related to Deuteronomy see Daniel Block, "Recovering the Voice of Moses: The Genesis of Deuteronomy," in *The Gospel According to Moses* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), pp. 21-67.

15 For example, Josh 8:31; 23:6; 24:26; 1 Kings 2:3.

16 Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), pp. 10-11.

17 By "books" here we refer not only to the book form ("codex"), which was not invented until the second century A.D., but also to the idea of a book as a complex literary product, an extended document or a combination of documents. This statement does not intend to overlook the rare exceptions where elites such as Shulgi or Enheduanna claim to be authors. Also, of course, in Egypt as early as the Old Kingdom there are collections of wisdom instruction attributed to an authority (e.g., Ptahhotep), though we still have to differentiate between author and authority figure. On the issue of royal authorship in Mesopotamian traditions see Eckart Frahm, "Keeping Company with Men of Learning: The King as Scholar," in Radner and Robson, *Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, pp. 520-22.

18 Much of this information is summarized from Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

19 Exceptions are found in the works of the high priestess Enheduanna in the Ur III period in Mesopotamia. It is also worth noting lower officials whose names are preserved in the Instructions in Egypt as authority figures (e.g., Anii, Amenemope).

20 Thanks to Jonathan Walton for this illustration.

Proposition 2

1 This is similar to the way translations are updated today. The English language has changed and different translation philosophies exist. The English translation is not itself seen as authoritative, but as a competent reflection of the authority that underlies the translation. Updating is beneficial.

2 Language was not the only updating. We sometimes find two city names given (the old one and the more recent one, e.g., Laish/Dan in Judg 18:29) or even just the name that a city later had (therefore making that name anachronistic in the context). Some consider this the case with the name Rameses for the city that was being built by the Hebrew slaves in Exodus 1:11.

3 A current summary of the field and investigation of the issue can be found in Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009). See also William Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 38-63; Jens Bruun Kofoed, *Text and History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005); C. A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).

4This is not very different from the question about whether Jesus spoke in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek.

5Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 110.

6Eckart Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011).

7Examples are presented at length in van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, pp. 125-32.

8Of course this "typical sequence" is itself too simplistic and sterile. We really have no idea how and when or in what way the literary texts interacted with the oral texts. But our understanding of the texts we possess needs to allow for this sort of scenario.

Proposition 3

1Kenton Sparks, *God's Words in Human Words* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 243; see also Sparks, "The Sun also Rises: Accommodation in Inscripturation and Interpretation," in *Evangelicals and Scripture*, ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 112-32.

2Speech-act theory was proposed by John Searle reflecting on pragmatic views of communication in order to offer a systematic classification of the basic units of intentional communication. Summarized by Nicolai Winther-Nielsen, "Fact, Fiction, and Language Use: Can Modern Pragmatics Improve on Halpern's Case for History in Judges?" in *Windows into Old Testament History*, ed. V. Philips Long, David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 54.

3The *implied audience* refers to the audience as the communicator perceives it. In the same way, *implied author* refers to what the audience can infer about the "author" and his or her meaning from the communicative act. That is, the audience cannot cross-examine or psychoanalyze the "author." His/Her meaning is determined by unpacking the communication that has been offered by the means available in the language, culture and context in which it took place.

4Speech-act theory developed in reference to the sentence unit and had little interest in meaning.

5It is important not to confuse illocution with message or meaning of the communication. Illocution refers to the act in which the communicator is engaged (e.g., command); message or meaning would seek to understand what the command is and what it means. The important point is that if we misread the illocution, we are likely to also misinterpret, because understanding the illocution provides the doorway into interpretation. For example, some read Genesis 1:28 ("Be fruitful and increase in number") as having an illocution of command and therefore interpret the meaning as imposing obligation on humanity. In contrast, the text specifically identifies the illocution as blessing—a different sort of speech act that does not impose obligation. Misunderstanding the illocution therefore leads to misinterpretation of the meaning.

6Even Jerome recognized this distinction we have noted, "Many things in Sacred Scripture . . . are said in accordance with the opinion of the time in which the events took place, rather than in accordance with the actual truth of the matter." Jerome, *Commentary on Jeremiah* 28:10-11. I am grateful to Michael Graves for this reference.

7A technique illustrated in K. Lawson Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), and John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

Proposition 4

1This concept is developed in my prior book, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

2Even with regard to something so apparently established as cosmic geography, we note the recent decision that Pluto should no longer be considered a planet.

3Some consider prophecy an example of this very thing, which we will discuss in detail in proposition 16.

4Perhaps one exception could be that we do not accept a scientific suggestion about the eternality of matter because of a theological belief that the material world is contingent on God.

5This is *not* a partial authority view, which evangelicals often reject. We have never believed that authority is bound up in the locutions—that is why we insist that the Bible is inerrant in all that it *affirms*.

6I am further persuaded that a historical Adam and Eve are the ones who made that choice.

7It is also true that science cannot be used to identify what are essentially theological entailments. Science is not a legitimate vehicle for theological truth.

8See a survey of this belief in Edwin Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 19-33.

9This situation occurs with all sorts of minor elements that abound in the biblical text: Does a rabbit chew the cud (Lev 11:6)? Is the mustard seed the smallest seed (Mk 4:31)? Are dietary laws related to modern ideas of hygiene? In each case I would say that people could draw such scientific conclusions, but those conclusions would be connected to interpretation and therefore would not carry the authority of the text. Skeptics are mistaken to use these occasional interpretations to argue against the inerrancy of the Bible.

10We do recognize that the nature of evidence and what constitutes plausibility differs somewhat between the sciences and biblical studies/theology, though both have a level of dependence on rational thinking. Being dependent on rational deduction, neither is intrinsically endowed with biblical authority.

Stepping Back and Summing Up

1For good discussion see Daniel Block, “Moses and the Pentateuch: An Investigation into the Biblical Evidence,” *Areopagus Journal* (Spring 2012): 6-14.

2For details see Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 132.

3Since Enoch is not in the canon, the claims that it makes for itself are of no consequence to us. It is Jude’s presumed claim that could be problematic.

4We should not think of early periods as being too primitive to produce literary compositions. The issue is how communication takes place in culture and what the inclinations would be in preserving traditions.

5There remain, however, numerous examples, more in OT than in NT, of passages where we feel confident that the text as we have it has been corrupted but we have no wherewithal to construct with confidence what the original might have said (see Ps 2:12; 22:16; Prov 11:30).

6Of course, it can occasionally make a difference. Snake handlers trust in the reliability of the longer ending of Mark. But that is an exceptional case and one that involves hermeneutics as much as textual transmission.

7In books like Job it may be better to think of an original literary composition.

8See judicious discussions in Bruce K. Waltke, "Old Testament Textual Criticism," in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, ed. David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Mathews and Robert B. Sloan (Nashville: B & H, 1994), pp. 156-86; Bruce Waltke, "Textual Criticism of the Old Testament and Its Relation to Exegesis and Theology," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:51-67; Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); Al Wolters, "Text of the Old Testament," in *Face of Old Testament Studies*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), pp. 19-37. For in-depth, up-to-date scholarly discussion, see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

9See further discussion in John Walton, *Job*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 23-31.

10Not in a freewheeling process but one that would have been accountable under the careful scrutiny of the scribal schools and the faith community.

Proposition 5

1Cited in Michael Grant and Rachel Kitzinger, *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), p. xxvi.

2Ruth Scodel, "*Works and Days* as Performance," in *Orality, Literacy and Performance in the Ancient World*, ed. Elizabeth Minchin (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 111-27.

3Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

4See, for example, Robert Fowler, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

5"Herodotus was the greatest storyteller of all time"; Michael Grant, *Greek and Roman Historians: Information and Misinformation* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 61.

6See, for example, Douglas Kelly, "Oral Xenophon," pp. 149-64 in *Voice into Text: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece*, ed. Ian Worthington (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

7Isocrates was reportedly the first orator to write out his speeches.

8Michael Gagarin, "The Orality of Greek Oratory," pp. 163-80 in *Signs of Orality: The Oral Tradition and Its Influence in the Greek and Roman World*, ed. E. Anne Mackay (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

9David E. Aune, "Prolegomena to the Study of Oral Tradition in the Hellenistic World," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. Henry Wansbrough (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), esp. pp. 73-85.

10William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

11Merritt Sale, "Virgil's Formularity and *Pius Aeneas*," pp. 199-220 in Mackay, *Signs of Orality*.

12B. G. Campbell, *Performing and Processing the* Aeneid, Berkeley Insights in Linguistics and Semiotics 48 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p. ix.

13The most recent volume is Elizabeth Minchin, ed., *Orality, Literacy and Performance in the Ancient World*, Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

14Walter J. Ong, "Foreword," in Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), p. xiv.

Proposition 6

1Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985); cited in Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 197.

2Eric Havelock, "The Oral-Literate Equation: A Formula for the Modern Mind," in *Literacy and Orality*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 20.

3Ibid., p. 21.

4David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, eds., *Literacy and Orality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 7.

5John Miles Foley, "What's in a Sign?" in *Signs of Orality*: *The Oral Tradition and Its Influence in the Greek and Roman World*, ed. E. Anne Mackay (Leiden: Brill, 1998), p. 2.

6Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*: *The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982; 2nd ed. Routledge, 2002).

7David R. Olson, "Why Literacy Matters, Then and Now," in Olson and Torrance, *Literacy and Orality*, p. 387.

8Mackay, *Signs of Orality*, p. vii.

9Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), p. 17.

10Furniss is particularly helpful for the following comparisons; Graham Furniss, *Orality: The Power of the Spoken Word* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

11David Claydon, ed., *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, Lausanne Occasional Papers 54 (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and International Orality Network, 2005), esp. pp. 35, 56, 67; see also the extensive bibliography. Reportedly, two-thirds of the world's population in the twenty-first century can't, won't or don't read and write.

12Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (Binghamton, NY: Global, 2000), p. 55; cited in Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel*, p. 17.

Proposition 7

1See, for example, "Oral Xenophon," pp. 149-64 in *Voice into Text: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece*, ed. Ian Worthington (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

2K. H. Waters, *Herodotus the Historian: His Problems, Methods and Originality* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), p. 76. "Herodotus was primarily concerned with the collection and preservation of the oral traditions of Greeks and barbarians; criticism was a secondary issue"; Arnaldo Momigliano, "Historiography on Written Tradition and Historiography on Oral Tradition," in *Studies in Historiography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), pp. 211-20. Both cited in David E. Aune, "Prolegomena to the Study of Oral Tradition in the Hellenistic World," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. Henry Wansbrough (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), p. 77.

3Oswyn Murray, "Greek Historians," in *The Oxford History of the Classical World*, ed. J. Boardman, J. Griffin and O. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 191.

4Roy Hyde, "Historical Writing in the Classical Era," in *Classical Literature: An Introduction*, ed. N.

Croally and R. Hyde (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 141-42. See also the comment that "Herodotus was the greatest storyteller of all time," in Michael Grant, *Greek and Roman Historians: Information and Misinformation* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 61.

5Hyde, "Historical Writing in the Classical Era," p. 151.

6M. I. Finley, *The Portable Greek Historians: The Essence of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Polybius* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 11.

7Grant, *Greek and Roman Historians*, pp. 37-40.

8Ancient citations in this chapter are the author's own translation.

9Grant, *Greek and Roman Historians*, pp. 44-53.

10Grant identifies several factors that led to misinformation: self-justification, family pressure, politics, anachronism, wars, moralizing; ibid., pp. 88-89.

11For discussion, see Mathilde Cambron-Goulet, "The Criticism—and the Practice—of Literacy in the Ancient Philosophical Tradition," pp. 201-26 in *Orality, Literacy and Performance in the Ancient World*, ed. Elizabeth Minchin (Leiden: Brill, 2012); and Loveday Alexander, "The Living Voice: Skepticism Towards the Written Word in Early Christian and in Graeco-Roman Texts," pp. 221-47 in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), esp. pp. 237-42.

12Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Epigraphical Rabbis," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 72 (1981): 9.

13William Scott Green, "Rabbi in Classical Judaism," in *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, ed. J. Neusner, A. J. Avery-Peck and W. S. Green (New York: Continuum, 1999), p. 1130.

14Hyam Maccoby, *Early Rabbinic Writings*, Cambridge Commentaries on Writings of the Jewish and Christian World 200 BC to AD 200, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 3.

15Ibid., p. 4; italics in original.

16Jacob Neusner, "Rabbinic Judaism, Formative Canon of," in Neusner, Avery-Peck and Green, *Encyclopedia of Judaism*, p. 1134.

17Ibid.

18Shmuel Safrai, *The Literature of the Sages: First Part: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), p. 36.

19Ibid., p. 45.

20Richard Kalmin, "Rabbis," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 1132.

21Maccoby, *Early Rabbinic Writings*, p. 8; for a similar statement see Safrai, *Literature of the Sages*, p. 35. Maccoby also states that hardly anything in rabbinic literature is literary in the normal sense of the word (p. 1).

22Jn 1:38, 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8; 20:16. John the Baptist was also called rabbi: Jn 3:26.

23See proposition 10 for discussion of oral texts of the Gospels, which preceded written forms.

Proposition 8

1Gary M. Burge, *Jesus, the Middle Eastern Storyteller* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

2Ibid, p. 15.

3Kenneth E. Bailey, "Jesus the Metaphorical Theologian and the Rabbinic World," in *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 21-22.

4We must admit, however, that for one of Jesus' stories in particular there is some uncertainty whether it was a parable: the rich man and the beggar Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). We think it was a parable, along with Bock and others: Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 431-34.

5The NT volumes are: Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) and Clinton E. Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

6See, for example, Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

7For the following paragraphs, see the discussion and documentation in Chris Keith, *The* Pericopae Adulterae, *the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus*, New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents 38 (Leiden: Brill, 2009); note especially chap. 3, "Writing and Gradations of Literacy," pp. 53-94.

8William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); cf. the discussion in proposition 5.

9Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.12 § 60.

10Richard A. Horsley and Jonathan A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

11Mt 12:3, 5 (=Mk 2:25; Lk 6:3); Mt 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture translations in propositions 8–13 are the author's own.

12Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), p. 17.

13Cited in James L. Kugel, "Early Jewish Biblical Interpretation," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 121-22.

14John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 235.

15Chris Keith, *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

16For fuller discussion see Keith, *The* Pericopae Adulterae, especially chap. 4, "Scribal Literacy in the New Testament World," pp. 95-117.

17Some may imagine that the gifts of the magi endowed the family with ample resources for things like education, but what Joseph and Mary did with those gifts is conjecture.

18In Matthew's Gospel this statement appears at a different point in Jesus' ministry (Mt 7:28-29).

Proposition 9

1The subtitle is for chapter 1, "The 'Jabez Prayer' Phenomenon"; Richard L. Schultz, *Out of Context: How to Avoid Misinterpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012).

2Eric J. Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses of the Bible: Surprising Ways God's Word Is Misunderstood* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany, 2012); D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996); Moisés Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

3Walter J. Ong, "Foreword," in Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), p. xiii.

4"Word-Study Fallacies," pp. 27-64 in Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*; and "Divine Truth Expressed in Human Words: Challenges with Language," pp. 57-73 in Schultz, *Out of Context*.

5Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 598-601; see also Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement*, 9th ed., revised and augmented by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 1057-59; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), §33.98-99; William D. Mounce, ed., *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), pp. 801-4.

6The Greek word *rhēma* also commonly designated oral communication; for example, "Go and stand in the temple and speak the words [*rhēmata*] of life" (Acts 5:20).

7See, for example, Homer A. Kent Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), pp. 89-90.

8Greek grammars discuss uses of the collective singular; see, for example, Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, rev. by G. M. Messing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), §996, p. 269.

9See also Lk 3:2; 11:28; Jn 10:35.

10*Logos* took on a variety of connotations at the time of the New Testament, including *statement, report, explanation, exhortation, reasoning, proposition, plea, pretext, narrative, tradition, command, a subject under discussion, reckoning* and even *gospel*. In each case these could denote oral communication.

11An electronic search for "God said" and "Lord said" in the Old Testament (NRSV, NIV and CEV translations) found 316 references.

12D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar NT Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 115.

13"The Gospel of John is about revelation: the text begins with audible revelation ('Word'), moving on to visible revelation ('light'), and thence back and forth between the two (embodied in Jesus' signs and discourses) as the story unfolds"; J. Ramsay Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 46.

14Greek Stoic philosophers personified *logos* as the Reason or Force that set the universe in motion; in Jewish thought divine *logos* designated wisdom.

15Cited by Timothy George on the book jacket of *Talking the Walk: Letting Christian Language Live Again* by Marva Dawn (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

Proposition 10

1See proposition 13 for more explanation.

2"It seems clear to me that most modern English translations err on the side of clarity of information and so do not adequately represent creative artistry or ambiguity of ancient Jewish poets or narrators"; James E. Bowley, *Introduction to Hebrew Bible: A Guided Tour of Israel's Sacred Library* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008), p. 30.

3Okay, we made that one up, but who knows—it may be on some editor's desk somewhere! Remarkably, in the Holman Christian Standard Version there's a long list of specialty Bibles, including *The Firefighter's Bible*, *The Coastguardsman's Bible*, *The Men's Fraternity Bible*, *The Nurse's Bible*, etc.

4Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); see also Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

5Cf. E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012). Unfortunately they do not include a discussion of the cultural blinder of textuality in seeking to understand orality.

6An example of an oral text is the Sermon on the Mount; before being written down, it was transmitted orally by early Christian communities.

7For a helpful overview, which informed the following discussion, see Paul R. Eddy, "Orality and Oral Transmission," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), pp. 641-50; see also Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

8Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe, ASNU 22 (Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1961).

9See, however, for defense and expansion of this view, Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*, WUNT 2.7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981); and more recently, Werner H. Kelber and Samuel Byrskog, eds., *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009).

10Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983).

11For example, Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*: *The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982; 2nd ed. Routledge, 2002).

12See especially Tom Thatcher, ed., *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text: Beyond the Oral and the Written Gospel* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

13Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

14Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper and John Miles Foley, eds., *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark: Essays Dedicated to Werner Kelber* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

15Rafael Rodríguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance and Text* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), p. 4 (italics in original).

16But see the book of Revelation where John is told to write; for example, Rev 1:11; 21:5.

17Several references to writing appear in the Gospels, though not of Jesus' words. Most are references to

Moses and writing the Law; for example, "We have found the one that Moses wrote about in the Law and the prophets" (Jn 1:45); see also Mk 10:4-5; 12:19; Lk 20:28; Jn 5:46. For other references to writing see Lk 1:63; 16:6-7; Jn 19:19-22.

18 The adverb *simply* could be read in a pejorative sense that oral culture is not as advanced as textual culture; but that's not the point here.

19 Bailey reports that books are not needed at the Atshani Syrian Orthodox seminary in Lebanon; students learn theology by singing the hymns of St. Ephrem, hymns that are theologically astute because they were composed to displace heresy in the church. Kenneth E. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Themelios* 20, no. 2 (1995): 6 (see the original publication in *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 [1991]: 34-54).

20 See also Jn 6:63; 12:49-50; 14:10.

21 See Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

22 Mk 1:22; Lk 4:32; Mt 7:29; Jn 7:46; Mt 13:54.

23 Jn 7:15; Mt 21:23; cf. Lk 20:21, 26, 40.

24 So Carson says that Jesus "means the entire divine purpose prophesied in Scripture must take place; not one jot or tittle will fail of its fulfillment"; D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 146. Similarly, Turner notes that Jesus was "affirming that God will bring to pass even the most trivial parts of the law [and] implies that its weightier matters are absolutely certain to be accomplished"; David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 163.

25 "'Word' (*logos*) here means the message of the Gospel, especially as embodied in the words and deeds of Jesus." Walter L. Liefeld, *Luke*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 822.

26 In contrast, see Martin C. Albl, *And Scripture Cannot Be Broken: The Form and Function of the Early Christian* Testimonia *Collections*, NovTSupp 96 (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

27 "Luke joins himself to those others who have catalogued Jesus' life. They drew from the apostolic tradition for these accounts. . . . Any interpretation that Luke is contrasting himself to his predecessors does not honor the presence of *kai*"; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), p. 59. See additional discussion of Luke's prologue in proposition 9.

Proposition 11

1 For fuller discussion see Graham Furniss, *Orality: The Power of the Spoken Word* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 4-10.

2 Kenneth E. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Themelios* 20, no. 2 (1995): 4-11 (the original publication was in *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 [1991]: 34-54).

3 Eduard Nielsen, *Oral Tradition*, Studies in Biblical Theology 11 (Chicago: A. R. Allensen, 1954), p. 21; cited in Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition," p. 5.

4 Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition," p. 7.

5 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner, 1921, 1958); Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Tradition in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*

(Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1961).

6Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition,” p. 10.

7Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

8Darrell L. Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?” pp. 73-99 in *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

9This explanation does not account for the four different wordings of the placard on the cross, because according to Jn 19:20, Pilate posted it in Greek (as well as in Aramaic and Latin).

10Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels,” p. 89.

11Ibid., p. 88.

12Ibid., p. 81.

13Joachim Jeremias, “Characteristics of the *Ipsissima Vox*,” pp. 107-14 in *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and Scot McKnight (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005). “Inerrancy does not demand that the *Logia Jesu* (the sayings of Jesus) contain the *ipsissima verba* (the exact words) of Jesus, only the *ipsissima vox* (the exact voice)”; Paul D. Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), p. 301; cf. Grant Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical,” *JETS* 42 (1999): 202-24.

14Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition,” p. 10.

Proposition 12

1It’s conceivable that Paul may have written a letter(s) before this time, which was not preserved, but nothing is mentioned of it. He and Barnabas may have been letter carriers when they went to Jerusalem with a gift from the church at Antioch (Acts 11:29-30).

2In the book of Acts *word of God* occurs eleven times, and in Paul’s letters it occurs eight times; *logos* and *rhēma* appear to be synonymous in this common phrase.

3Nigel Turner, *Christian Words* (London: T & T Clark, 1981), p. 481.

4See also Acts 6:2; 8:14; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5; 13:7; 13:46; 17:13.

5The only exception would be a brief letter that the church in Jerusalem sent to the church in Antioch: Acts 15:22-29.

6Other passages with similar references to the OT are as follows: Paul says, “Whatever other commandment there is, it is summed up in this one statement [word]” (Rom 13:9), and then he quotes Lev 19:18 (cf. Gal 5:14). After several OT quotations, Peter writes, “They stumble because they disobey the truth [word]” (1 Pet 2:8), though it’s not clear whether *logos* refers to the preceding quotations or to God’s truth in general. For a discussion of 2 Pet 1:19, see proposition 18.

7When Paul said it was no trouble to write the same things again, it is not certain whether he was referring to writing something he had stated orally before or had written before; see Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 124.

8For early patristic evidence that affirmed the authority of the apostles, see Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging Perspectives on the Origins of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP

Academic, 2013), pp. 68-69.

9Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 229.

10Compare what Jesus said to his disciples about passing on to them the words the Father had given him (Jn 17:8, 14).

11It appears that Paul would have written at least six of his letters before the book of Acts came to a close.

12Paul refers to his scrolls and parchments, but we can only guess what was on those scrolls (2 Tim 4:13).

13Michael Kruger observes, "It is here that we see the obvious connection between the role of the apostles and the beginnings of the canon. If apostles were viewed as the mouthpiece of Christ, and it was believed that they wrote down that apostolic message in books, then those books would be received as the very words of Christ himself"; Kruger, *The Question of Canon*, pp. 69-70.

14See 1 Cor 4:19; cf. 2 Jn 12; 3 Jn 13. Mitchell, however, argues that in some cases Paul preferred writing a letter over making a personal visit; Margaret Mitchell, "New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: The Example of Timothy and Titus," *JBL* 111 (1992): 641-62.

15Luke does not record Paul visiting Colossae and Laodicea, cities in the Lycus River valley in the Roman province of Asia, but since Paul spent over two years in Ephesus, and since Luke reports that during this time all the Jews and Greeks in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord, it's apparent that Paul's influence was felt in these cities even if he never preached there. (People from surrounding cities traveled through Ephesus and may have heard the gospel from Paul.) Paul's comment in his letter to the Colossians makes clear that he knew some of the people in Colossae and Laodicea (Col 2:1; 4:13, 15), and sending greetings from the churches in Asia to the church at Corinth (1 Cor 16:19) suggests that he was personally acquainted with many of those believers.

Proposition 13

1Cf. Mark Noll's helpful book on turning points in the history of Christianity, though he does not include the invention of printing; Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

2Perhaps we can get a sense of the momentous change from manuscript to print culture as we observe the revolution that the digital age is bringing to our culture; being in the middle of it, however, it's not easy to see the extent of change this will have on all of us.

3Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); cf. David R. Olson, "Why Literacy Matters, Then and Now," in *Literacy and Orality*, ed. D. R. Olson and N. Torrance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 88; see also Neil Postman's comment, cited in proposition 6.

4Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

5Donald Jackson, *The Saint John's Bible*, 7 vols. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005-2012).

6Wallace is willing to guess that there are "as many as another 1000 Greek New Testament manuscripts yet to be discovered"; interview by Derek Keefe, *Christianity Today*, posted April 23, 2008, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/aprilweb-only/117-32.0.html. See also the Center for the Study of

New Testament Manuscripts begun by Wallace in 2002; the goal is to make digital photographs of every page of every Greek manuscript, version and patristic commentary on the New Testament, estimated to be 1.3 million total pages.

7Schnabel says "roughly three hundred thousand variant readings"; Eckhard Schnabel, "Textual Criticism: Recent Developments," in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 59. Schnabel's figure is based on the work of the International Greek New Testament Project. Ehrman stretches this figure to as many as 400,000 variants; Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 89-90; cf. Bart D. Ehrman, "Textual Criticism of the New Testament," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 130.

8The situation is somewhat different for the manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible that were copied by Jewish scholars (Masoretes) in Galilee from the sixth to the ninth centuries A.D. Though the earliest of their manuscripts to survive are dated to the ninth century—many centuries after the actual writing of the books of the Old Testament—these manuscripts are the text behind the majority of English Bibles. The work of the Masoretes in accurately copying the manuscripts is legendary, though the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint have preferred readings in more than two hundred cases—at least according to the decisions of the translators of the New International Version.

9So argues Ehrman; Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Wallace agrees, stating that the shaping of the text by orthodox scribes "occurs in hundreds of places"; Daniel B. Wallace, "The Textual Reliability of the New Testament: A Dialogue," in *The Reliability of the New Testament: Bart D. Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), p. 41.

10Wallace critiques Ehrman: "Bart sees in the textual variants something more pernicious, more sinister, more conspiratorial and therefore more controlled than I do"; Wallace, "Textual Reliability of the New Testament," p. 29.

11A later development in the production of multiple copies of books of the New Testament was care in making accurate copies. Scribes became aware of the frequency of variants and took measures to limit the number of variants. Some scribes counted the lines of their exemplar to make sure they ended up with the same number of lines. Sometimes correctors double checked the work of scribes and made necessary corrections.

12David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 75.

13Michael W. Holmes, "Textual Criticism," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues* [essentially a second ed. of *New Testament Criticism and Introduction*], ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: B & H, 2001), p. 93; but see a subsequent essay: Michael W. Holmes, "Text and Transmission in the Second Century," in Stewart, *The Reliability of the New Testament*, pp. 61-79.

14"Today, the 'initial text' has displaced the 'original text' as the goal (and phrase) of choice, signaling a shift in how the reconstructed text is understood. The initial text is the hypothetical witness that stands at the beginning of the textual tradition. Textual critics now concede that our printed texts may not be exactly what the ancient authors penned"; Juan Hernández Jr., "Textual Criticism," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), pp. 959-63; cf. Eldon J. Epp, "Issues in New Testament Textual Criticism: Moving from the Nineteenth Century to the Twenty-First Century," in *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism*, ed. David Alan Black (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 72-75.

15Cf. B. Ward Powers, *The Progressive Publication of Matthew: An Explanation of the Writing of the Synoptic Gospels* (Nashville: B & H, 2010).

16Bart D. Ehrman, "The Textual Reliability of the New Testament: A Dialogue," in Stewart, *Reliability of the New Testament*, pp. 14, 21.

17Daniel B. Wallace, "The Textual Reliability of the New Testament: A Dialogue," in Stewart, *Reliability of the New Testament*, p. 41.

18"Only about four hundred [variants] (less than one per page in an average English translation) have any significant bearing on the meaning of the passage at hand"; Craig Blomberg, *Making Sense of the New Testament: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 22.

19Hernández, "Textual Criticism," in *DJG* 2nd ed., p. 960.

20Alan Kirk, "Manuscript Tradition as a *Tertium Quid*: Orality and Memory in Scribal Practices," pp. 215-34 in *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text: Beyond the Oral and the Written Gospel*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

21Some NT manuscripts were evidently intended for liturgical use; Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 177-85.

22Regarding oral/aural features of the Gospels, such as wordplay based on sound, ring compositions and other oral remnants, see, for example, the essays in Thatcher, *Jesus, the Voice and the Text.*

23"In the Western world the printed book page is the primary site of information, and it is perceived to represent the stability and durability of communication"; Samuel Byrskog, "Introduction," in *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives*, ed. Werner H. Kelber and Samuel Byrskog (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), p. 1.

24We are not suggesting that the clarity of Scripture is not important, but we do contend that perspicuity does not rest on *ipsissima verba*; see Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); James Callahan, *The Clarity of Scripture: History, Theology and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

25Dale Martin contends that "Most evangelicals mistakenly insist on the reliability of the historically constructed text of the Bible also because they have an inadequate theology of scripture"; he calls for a theology of Scripture that does not depend on the original wording of the text; Dale B. Martin, "The Necessity of a Theology of Scripture," in Stewart, *Reliability of the New Testament*, p. 93.

26Ehrman commonly talks of mistakes in manuscripts; Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); see a slightly revised version of *Misquoting Jesus* under the title *Whose Word Is It?* with the same subtitle (New York: Continuum, 2008); see also Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them)* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009). Ehrman is criticized for his title *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*; see David Hutchison, "The 'Orthodox Corruption' of Mark 1:1," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 48.1 (Fall 2005): 34.

27Holmes, "Textual Criticism," p. 93.

28Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

29"Numerous variants in the Greek text and full acceptance of translations in the practice of the Christian church indicate that the exact wording of the text is not the most essential conceptual element"; David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 102.

30David Parker, "What Is the Text of the New Testament?" in Stewart, *Reliability of the New Testament*, p.

103.

Stepping Back and Summing Up

1For a review of recent scholarship on the Septuagint, see Kristin De Troyer, "The Seventy-Two and Their Many Grandchildren: A Review of Septuagint Studies from 1997 Onward," *Currents in Biblical Research* 11.1 (2012): 8-64.

2Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), p. 93.

3Bruce K. Waltke, "How We Got the Hebrew Bible: The Text and Canon of the Old Testament," in *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape, and Interpretation*, ed. Peter W. Flint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 41.

4Jobes and Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, p. 101.

5For a basic introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls, see C. Marvin Pate, *Communities of the Last Days: The Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament and the Story of Israel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). More thorough analysis can be found in Weston W. Fields, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Full History*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Peter Flint and James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Lawrence Schiffman and James C. VanderKam, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

6Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. xvi. Regarding text-types, some scrolls were proto-Masoretic, some pre-Samaritan, about 5 percent Septuagintal and so forth.

7Waltke, "How We Got the Hebrew Bible," p. 38.

8Molly M. Zahn, "Text Types, Hebrew," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 1299.

9Eugene Ulrich, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Biblical Text," in Flint and Vanderkam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls After Fifty Years*, p. 88, emphasis in original.

10Waltke, "How We Got the Hebrew Bible," p. 35.

11For overviews of the use of the Old Testament in the New, see G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); Steve Moyise, *Evoking Scripture: Seeing the Old Testament in the New* (London: T & T Clark, 2008); Stanley E. Porter, *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

12Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), pp. 183-87.

13The complexity of this discussion is beyond the range of this book, taking into consideration targums, midrash, testimony-texts and so forth; for a helpful overview, see Richard B. Hays and Joel B. Green, "The Use of the Old Testament by New Testament Writers," pp. 122-39 in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

14Moisés Silva, "Old Testament in Paul," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 632. See also Andrew Chester's comment: "Scripture is used not in a passive way but is moulded creatively for the

author's purpose, and frequently to support a particular position"; Andrew Chester, "Citing the Old Testament," pp. 141-69 in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars, SSF*, ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 165.

15Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 45.

16Paul Feinberg doesn't go far enough, but at least he admits: "Inerrancy does not require verbal exactness in the citation of the Old Testament by the New"; Paul D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), p. 300.

17Shemaryahu Talmon, "Oral Tradition and Written Transmission, or the Heard and Seen Word in Judaism of the Second Temple Period," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. Henry Wansborough (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), p. 150; emphasis in original.

18Thanks to Dan Reid for this image.

Proposition 14

1I am grateful to Aubrey Buster for significant time spent aiding in research and editing of this chapter.

2Terms of speech-act theory were introduced in proposition 3. Locution is the words themselves; illocution is what the communicator is trying to do with those words. We may conclude, for example, that the communicator desires to instruct (his illocution), but then we still have to determine the intended meaning of the instruction. So "illocution" does not equal meaning.

3"Historiography" refers to the practice and conventions of recording historical information and the events of history. "Mythography" refers to the writing of myths and mythical information. We use these terms to refer to literary works such as we are dealing with in the Bible and the ancient Near East.

4T. M. Bolin, "History, Historiography, and the Use of the Past in the Hebrew Bible," in *Limits of Historiography*, ed. C. S. Kraus (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 123.

5Ziony Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel* (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 78-79.

6Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, SBLWAW 19 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), p. 21.

7Though we realize that not all historiography and mythography is in narrative form, much of it is, and even that which is not works with the same principles and limitations.

8See Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, p. 3.

9Ibid., p. 49.

10Ibid., pp. 22-23.

11John Sailhamer offers important discussion of the distinction between text and event from a conservative theological position in *Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 8-22 and in *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 36-85. An example from art history was provided by him in the latter, p. 46.

12This would be the case for most all myths—think of Enki and World Order, or the Tale of Anzu. Nevertheless there are exceptions. If interpreters are correct, the Erra Epic relates to political events in the human world; but still one might inquire as to how it relates to the human world in its illocutions—

that is, is it asserting the reality of events? Another type of exception might be found in the flood story. It would be of great interest to evaluate the illocution of the flood story in Atrahasis and compare it to an evaluation of the flood story in Genesis. Are they the same genre? I think that one would have to conclude that both literatures assert an event in their illocutions, but this is only the start and would require a full-length analysis that, despite all the comparative study that has been focused on the flood accounts, has yet to be done. See William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2003) for translations of these myths.

13 Mark Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), p. 153.

14 Ibid.

15 A. K. Grayson, "Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: Literary Characteristics," in *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analysis*, ed. F. M. Fales (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1981), pp. 46-47.

16 Continuing debate about perlocution focuses on the relationship between intended and hoped for responses as over against the actual responses. Without minimizing the significance of that debate, we are going to use perlocution to pertain to that which the communicator anticipates as actually happening. The result of this is that it draws perlocution closer into the circle of illocution as both pertain to intentions.

17 Babylonian Chronicles are usually treated as the epitome of objectivity and accuracy in Mesopotamian historiography. See Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, pp. 49-50 for detailed critique of numerous egregious errors.

18 Jean-Jacques Glassner, "The Use of Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia," pp. 1815-23 in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Scribner, 1995), 3:1822.

19 John Marincola, "Genre, Convention, and Innovation in Greco-Roman Historiography," in *Limits of Historiography*, ed. C. S. Kraus (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 308-9.

20 For example, the fall of Jerusalem is an event; life in exile is an outcome.

21 Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, p. 10.

22 Jan Renkema, *Discourse Studies* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1993), cited in Nicolai Winther-Nielsen, "Fact, Fiction, and Language Use," in *Windows into Old Testament History*, ed. V. Philips Long, David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 68.

23 Winther-Nielsen, "Fact, Fiction, and Language Use," p. 70.

24 This would greatly reduce the sorts of variations that could legitimately be considered errors. An example of an error could be found in the opening lines of the book of Judith, where Nebuchadnezzar is identified as the king of the Assyrians and as reigning in Nineveh.

25 Zevit minimizes the problem of the subjectivity of such a claim as he qualifies: "Whatever is not effectively denied or disproved is to be regarded as true," *Religions of Ancient Israel*, p. 78; quoting Leona Toker, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose—From the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies," *Poetics Today* 18 (1997): 187-222.

26 The prevalent use of Photoshop greatly compounds this concept.

27 It is not impossible that some narratives that we have considered or might at first consider to be event oriented are not so at all. For example, we would not consider the book of Job to be event oriented (though we consider Job to be a historical person).

Proposition 15

1We *do* talk about locutions being inspired (all *graphē* are inspired), but that affirms their source (from God). They cannot be considered authoritative independent of their illocutions.

2See further description and citations in John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 287-95.

3For example, notice that we are prone to talk about the "Ten Commandments" when the biblical text refers to them as the "Ten Words" (*dĕbārîm*); Ex 20:1; 34:1, 27-28. See discussion in Daniel I. Block, "Reading the Decalogue Right to Left: The Ten Principles of Covenant Relationship in the Hebrew Bible," pp. 21-55 in *How I Love Your* Torah, *O Lord* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), esp. 23-36.

4See discussions in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (*NIDOTTE*) and *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (*TDOT*).

5Note that this resolves a passage that has been perceived as a problem, Gen 26:5, where Abraham is said to have kept the *torah*. We need not think that this presumes his knowledge of what came through Moses. Abraham himself had oracular information and instruction from God.

6*TDOT* 15:640.

7Stephen A. Kaufman, "The Structure of the Deuteronomic Law," *Maarav* 1, no. 2 (1978-1979): 105-58; John Walton, "The Decalogue Structure of the Deuteronomic Law," in *Interpreting Deuteronomy*, ed. D. Firth and P. Johnston (Nottingham: Apollos, 2012), pp. 93-117.

Proposition 16

1One Neo-Assyrian text contains several oracles by the same prophet, but they are not edited together into a literary work; Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, SAAS IX (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 1997), pp. lxiii and 22-27 (collection three).

2For full comparative discussion see John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 239-74.

3In some ways similar to how Plato or Epicurus were the authority figures behind the philosophies that generated whole schools of thought with many followers.

4We know that Isaiah had disciples (Is 8:16), and we know that the mantle of prophetic authority could be passed (2 Kings 2). We do not have a single verifiable case where the disciple's work was appended to that of the master (unless Jer 36:32 is so construed), but we have no reason to believe that it could not happen, nor would it be a problem if it did. Note Daniel Block, *Ezekiel 1-24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 18, lists seven stages in the composition from revelation to completion of the canonical book.

5For example, I find the case for the unity of Isaiah made by Richard Schultz to contain many persuasive points: Schultz, "Isaiah, Isaiahs, and Current Scholarship," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), pp. 243-62; also his article, "How Many Isaiahs Were There?" *Areopagus Journal* (Spring 2012): 16-23. But if Isaiah is not the one who recorded all his oracles, is the literary form of the oracles that we find in Isaiah the result of the scribes or disciples who did record them?

6The title of a book on the topic, G. K. Beale, *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

7For example, Richard Longenecker, Peter Enns.

8Walter C. Kaiser, G. K. Beale.

9Find the range of hermeneutical claims in Beale, *Right Doctrine From the Wrong Texts?*; and in Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde, eds., *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

Proposition 17

1Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982; 2nd ed. Routledge, 2002), pp. 12-13; cited in James D. G. Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003): 147-48. The idea for the analogy was provided by Ong, though we embellished his version considerably.

2As E. P. Sanders observed, "we do not know how to imagine the oral period"; E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM, 1989), p. 141; cited in Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting," p. 149. Regarding his presidential address at the 57th annual meeting of Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas in 2002, Dunn says, "The burden of my paper, however, is that we *must* endeavor to 'imagine the oral period' for the sake of historical authenticity, to re-envisage how tradition was transmitted in an orally structured society; also that we *can* do so, or at least are more able to do so than has generally been realized"; p. 149 (emphasis in original).

3The next several paragraphs are largely dependent on the discussion in Loveday Alexander, "The Living Voice: Skepticism Towards the Written Word in Early Christian and in Graeco-Roman Texts," pp. 221-47 in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

4For citations to the classical sources in this and the next two paragraphs, see Alexander, "Living Voice," pp. 224-35.

5Unless otherwise noted, Scripture translations in propositions 17-19 are the author's own.

6Alexander, "Living Voice," p. 235.

7Ibid., p. 226.

8Translations in this paragraph are the author's.

9Craig L. Blomberg, "Form Criticism," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 248.

10For further discussion and other arguments, see E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 33-36.

11The other statements confirming that the letters were written by secretaries are found in 1 Cor 16:21; Col 4:18; Philem 19.

12Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting," p. 145.

13Craig L. Blomberg, "Gospels (Historical Reliability)," in Green and McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 291.

14"The literary paradigm (including a clearly delineated Q document) is too restrictive"; Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting," p. 139.

15Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

16Craig S. Keener, "Assumptions in Historical-Jesus Research: Using Ancient Biographies and Disciples' Traditioning as a Control," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9, no. 1 (2011): 26-58. Licona's work is still in process, but see Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

17Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning, eds., *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); Werner H. Kelber, "The Works of Memory: Christian Origins as MnemoHistory—A Response," pp. 221-48 in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, ed. Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, SBL Semeia Studies 52 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

18James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 883; emphasis in original.

19We are not rehearsing here all the evidence that could be summarized from preceding chapters.

20Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting," p. 154.

21For fuller discussion, see Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 65-91.

22Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging Perspectives on the Origins of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), pp. 202-3.

23Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, p. 45.

24Ibid., p. 91.

25Ibid, pp. 33-46.

26Kruger, *Question of Canon*, pp. 21, 24.

Proposition 18

1See, for example, Louis Bouyer, *The Invisible Father: Approaches to the Mystery of the Divinity* (Petersham: St. Bede's, 1999); James Emery White, *Embracing the Mysterious God: Loving the God We Don't Understand* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

2Thankfully, God has revealed himself; see, for example, Ex 34:5-9.

3Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendricksen (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1978), p. 86.

4"The rhetorical artistry of this exordium [1:1-4] surpasses that of any other portion of the New Testament"; Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 36.

5Karen H. Jobes, *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), p. 66.

6Note that the preposition in Greek is the same in both cases; Jobes comments, "Hebrews is concerned to show the organic connection between Jesus Christ as the Word of God and the word of God spoken through the prophets"; *Letters to the Church*, p. 67.

7Note also that God spoke to the first Adam with the expectation that Adam would speak and act on his behalf; God spoke to the last Adam, and "Adam" did speak and act on his behalf (Gen 2:15-17; Jn 12:50).

8Steven D. Boyer and Christopher A. Hall, *The Mystery of God: Theology for Knowing the Unknowable* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), pp. 4-10.

9Ibid, p. xvii.

10Ibid, p. 11; italics in original.

11See Greg Paul, *Close Enough to Hear God Breathe: The Great Story of Divine Intimacy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011).

12The question of authorship of 2 Peter is not pertinent to the discussion at hand, so we will simply default to referring to Peter as the author. For a helpful discussion of authorship, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: B & H, 2003), pp. 255-76.

13An interpretive issue that is widely debated is what Peter meant when he said, "We have the prophetic word that is very sure" (2 Pet 1:19). An equally legitimate translation of the adjective would be *more sure*. In which case, was the prophetic word made more sure by Peter's eyewitness experience of the transfiguration, or was the prophetic word inherently more sure than his eyewitness experience? See Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), pp. 223-27.

Proposition 19

1Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

2Ibid, p. xiii.

3Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988), pp. 102, 104.

4Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. xiii.

5Paul also uses the image of a triumphal procession in Col 2:15, but in that case he imagines the victory of Jesus' resurrection as a triumph over enemies.

6Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul's Defense of His Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14-3:3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 16-34; Hafemann, "Paul's Argument from the Old Testament and Christology in 2 Cor. 1-9: The Salvation-History Restoration Structure of Paul's Apologetic," pp. 277-303 in *The Corinthian Correspondence*, ed. Reimund Bieringer (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996); Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 106-12.

7Thanks to Glen Thompson for this insight.

8Guthrie, for example, captions this section "An Exhortation to Steadfastness"; Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 173.

9"The character of those who taught the faith to [Timothy] verifies the trustworthiness of the contents"; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 581.

10An unconnected style is "repugnant by and large to the spirit of the Greek language"; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translation

and revision of the ninth-tenth German edition incorporating supplementary notes of A. Debrunner by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §458 (p. 239).

11Parallelism in Hebrew thought typically expresses similar concepts with different words.

12Douglas Farrow, *The Word of Truth and the Dispute About Words* (Winona Lake, IN: Carpenter, 1987), p. 96; see also the semantic analysis of 2 Tim 3:13-17.

13I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), p. 794.

14Regarding Paul's high view of Scripture, note his comment that the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God (Rom 3:2); see Brian Rosner, "'Written for Us': Paul's View of Scripture," in *A Pathway into Holy Scripture*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 89.

15Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 762. Marshall comments, "The point of the adjective here is surely to emphasise the authority of the Scriptures as coming from God and to indicate that they have a divinely-inspired purpose related to his plan of salvation. . . . The main thrust of the sentence lies in the second adjective"; Marshall, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, pp. 794-95.

16As noted above, the left sides of our brains tend to grasp factual and analytical reasoning; the right sides, multisensory and evocative imagery.

17Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 176. "Like Paul, Judaism universally accepted the Old Testament as God's word"; Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 630.

18Quinn and Wacker, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, p. 762.

19See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 28-33.

20Quinn and Wacker, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, p. 762.

21The classic discussion of 2 Tim 3:16 and inspiration is Warfield's; though he largely was defending a passive sense of inspiration, he sought to find in *God-breathed* more of the process than just the product; Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948).

22Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984, 1988), p. 279.

23As noted above, according to the parallels in the context, *Holy Scriptures* in verse 15 appears to refer to the same entity as *Scripture* in verse 16.

24S. M. Baugh, "2 Timothy," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 3, ed. C. E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 491. See the second "Stepping Back and Summing Up" section on the Septuagint.

Proposition 20

1This pliability was tested in the early 1980s in the discussions surrounding Robert Gundry's interpretation of Matthew as Midrash, in the following years in the debates over open theism and most recently by Peter Enns and Kenton Sparks in their embracing the skepticism of critical scholarship (see p. 282 for the books of Enns and Sparks).

2Most notably, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI).

3Since a proverb is a generalization, and a generalization by definition is a statement that is often true but not always true, it is difficult to articulate how a proverb could be considered inerrant. We would hasten to say that a proverb can have authority by virtue of the value(s) that it embodies, but "inerrancy" simply doesn't express that well.

4We don't intend this to be an all-encompassing statement about its application. So, for example, *inerrancy* would also be used to affirm that the Bible does not contain conflicting voices that offer differing theological conclusions (a common postmodern claim).

5We will discuss Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012) in proposition 21.

6Of course, the qualification must be understood that authority also exists in New Testament communicators as they extend the meaning of Old Testament works to new meanings. This remains "authority vested in the human communicator" as it adds a new, canonical level of human communication. *Sensus plenior* is perfectly acceptable in this model though is restricted to that identified as such by authoritative voices.

7If someone could offer sound reasoning to suggest that the parting of the Red Sea was just a motif used in ways that would be recognizable to the ancient audience as part of an attested genre, we would have to consider the claim; but such a claim has not been successfully defended in our opinion.

Proposition 21

1We are aware that others have used some of these same terms (e.g., Augustine), but also note that we are not necessarily using them the same way. For a modern example see Richard S. Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), though we are also going a somewhat different direction here.

2Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 148-49.

3This should not be mistaken as the "Intentional Fallacy." Here we have confidence that the communicator has successfully communicated his intention, and therefore we can comprehend it.

4Certainly rarely, if ever, dictation. The role of the Holy Spirit would often have been quite subtle, unrecognized by the human instrument and undetectable by any empirical criteria.

5Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012).

Faithful Conclusions for Virtuous Readers

1The same would hold true for the conquest under Joshua. God's role and support cannot be dismissed as a self-legitimating claim to a land grab.

2Craig Blomberg, discussing this same sort of complexity in NT writings, refers to this as "benign pseudonymity"; "A Constructive Traditional Response to New Testament Criticism," pp. 345-65 in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?*, ed. James Karl Hoffmeier and Dennis Robert Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), see p. 351. For a cautionary perspective, see in the same volume Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Paul, Timothy, and Titus," pp. 383-403.

About the Authors

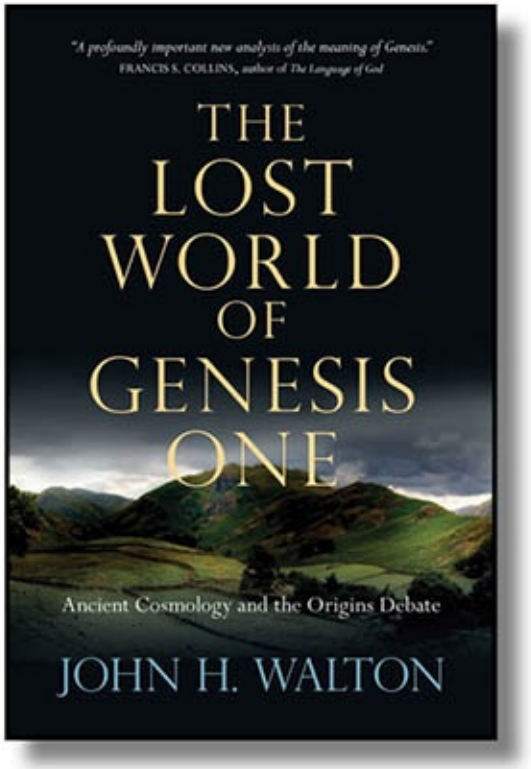


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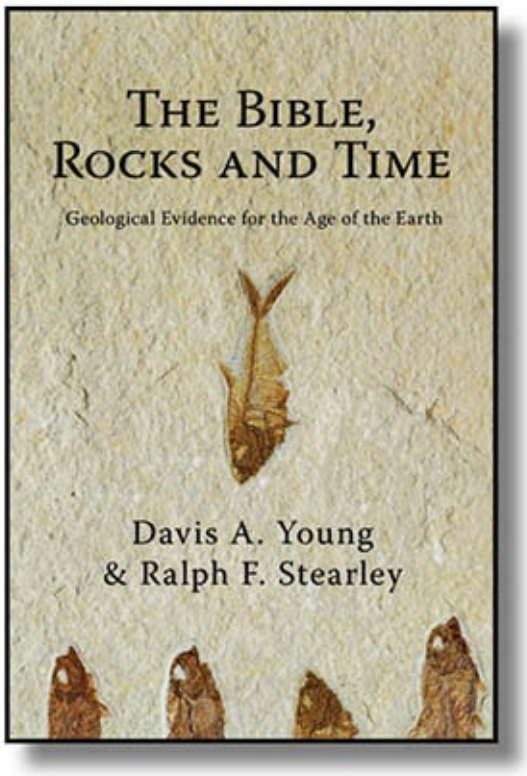


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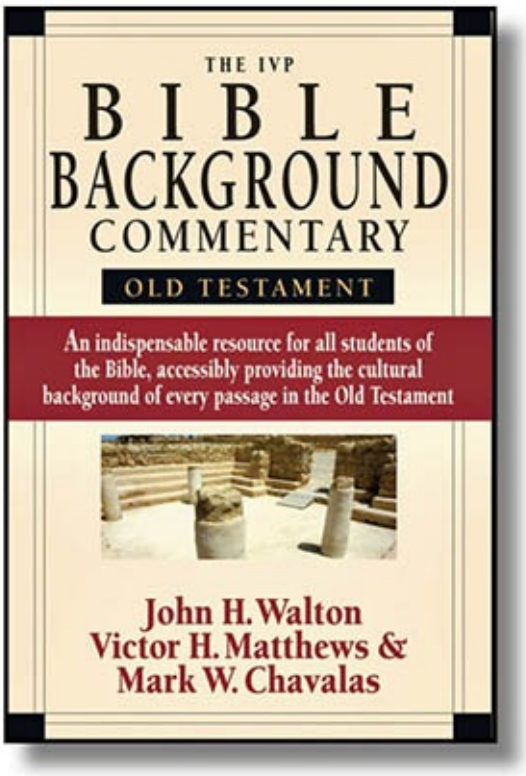
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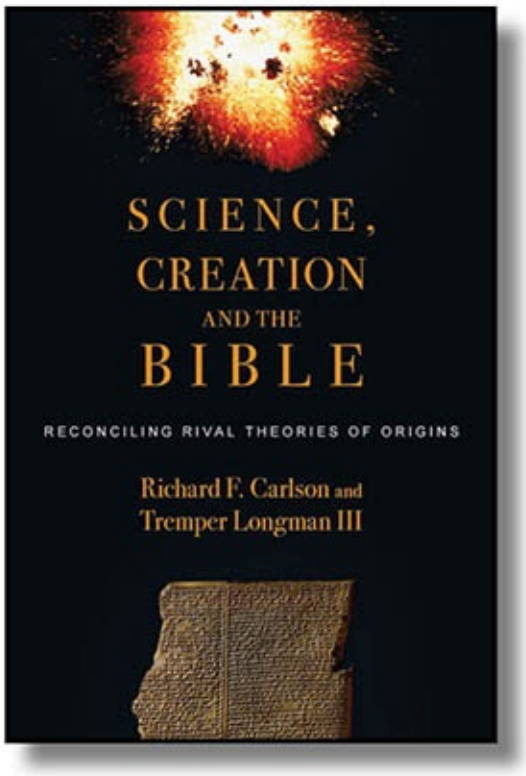


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