

Oral Tradition in Bible and New Testament Studies

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Modern biblical scholarship is largely a child of the high tech of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. It developed its basic assumptions about and approaches to biblical texts in working with the print Bible, the first major, mechanically constructed book in early modernity. For this reason, the historical, critical scholarship of the Bible has risked laboring under a cultural anachronism, projecting modernity's communications culture upon the ancient media world.

However, despite its resolutely text-centered habits, historical criticism has by no means been unaware of orality's role in the formation of biblical texts. The impact of form criticism, the method devised to deal with oral tradition, on biblical scholarship of both the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament has been immense. Today, form criticism is besieged with multiple problems, the most significant of which is its complicity with post-Gutenberg assumptions about ancient dynamics of communication.

Not only are biblical texts by and large located in close affinity to speech, but the form critical project has turned out to be largely misconceived. Orality studies, therefore, challenge biblical scholarship to rethink fundamental concepts of the Western humanistic legacy such as text and intertextuality, reading, writing and composing, memory and imagination, speech and oral/scribal interfaces, author and tradition. And they invite us to be suspicious of imagining tradition exclusively in closed-space, text-to-text relations, and instead to grow accustomed to notions such as compositional dictation, memorial apperception, auditory reception, and the interfacing of memory and manuscript. Contemporary research in orality is, therefore, anything but a mere embellishment of textual studies. John Miles Foley's observation that "what we are wrestling with is an inadequate theory of verbal art" applies with particular force to biblical studies (1991:5).

In gospel studies, three areas deserve renewed scrutiny from the perspective of orality research: the search for the historical Jesus, the nature of pre-gospel tradition, and the interrelationship among the synoptic gospels.

The twentieth-century scholarly search for the historical Jesus has been heavily informed by the form critical retrieval of the original form of sayings. Often the simplest form was taken to be the original. Orality studies, however, discount the very notion of the original form. Rather, oral performance enacts multiple original speech acts, a situation that suggests a culture of speech quite different from that represented by the one, original form.

The oral tradition bridging the Jesus of history and the canonical gospels is often viewed in linear, directional, and sometimes evolutionary terms. And yet, speech is bound up with temporality, and inaccessible to and unimaginable in any diagrammatic fashion. Moreover, oral tradition is usually reconstructed on the basis of oral footprints in gospel texts, but whether this or that saying or story was an actual oral performance must remain uncertain.

The Two-Source Hypothesis, the classic explanatory model accounting for the interrelationship of the three synoptic gospels, has been traditionally formulated as a literary problem that is to be examined in literary terms and subject to a literary resolution, leaving no room for oral interfacing, the poetics of gospel narrativity, and memorial activities.

Few academic fields are, or will be, as deeply affected by orality studies as biblical, and especially New Testament, studies.

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